

FIVE CENTS

BRAVE AND BOLD

A DIFFERENT COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK

No. 73

SEARED WITH IRON

or The Band of
SKELETON BAR



BY
CORNELIUS SHEA

For fully half a minute the red hot iron was kept there, and then, as it was drawn away, the brand of U. S. was revealed between Dick's shoulder blades.

BRAVE & BOLD

A Different Complete Story Every Week

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904, in the Office of the Librarian of Congress, Washington, D. C. STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 73.

NEW YORK, May 14, 1904.

Price Five Cents.

SEARED WITH IRON;

OR,

The Band of Skeleton Bar.

By CORNELIUS SHEA

CHAPTER I.

HELD UP.

Late in the afternoon of a March day, not many years ago, a rather dilapidated stage-coach was slowly winding its way across the mountain range known as Black Mesa in Arizona.

The four jaded horses hitched to the vehicle seemed to be doing their best, and the driver was urging them on in his endeavor to reach his destination at a little mining town called Skeleton Bar before darkness came on.

Five miles of the journey still lay before them, and unless the horses made a spurt the coach would not arrive on time.

There were but three passengers on this trip, and these belonged to one family.

The oldest of the three was Daniel Mount, and the other two were his sons, Dick and Walter.

Dick, the older of the two boys, was not over seventeen, and Walter, a delicate, sickly youth, was but fourteen.

The three had left their home in Topeka, Kan., to come out to the gold fields of Arizona in order to better their condition in life, if possible.

The mother of the two boys had died several years before, and having no wife to run the risk of the perils and hardships of the Arizona wilds, Daniel Mount did not hesitate to leave Topeka, when he became satisfied that there was small chance of his getting work there.

His son, Dick, was handsome, well formed and large for his age, and knew how to handle a rifle or revolver as well as the majority of the crack shots of the West. He also possessed a goodly amount of the articles known as courage and determination, and he was not afraid of work.

But Walter! Well, it was simply out of the question to think of him doing anything at the mines. He was so weak and delicate-looking that the casual observer would not have given him a year longer to live. Anyhow, he insisted that he would be quite able to do the cooking for his father and brother, and he seemed as happy and contented as any of the three.

Of course they were anxious to reach their destination, and frequently the younger of the boys would ask the driver how much farther it was to Skeleton Bar.

"We'll be thar putty soon now, I reckon," said the handler of the ribbons in reply to the last query. "I allers like ter git in afore dark on account o' ther mail. I was

held up by a gang of masked men about two weeks ago, an' they took ther mail bags with 'em, an' all ther wealth my passengers had, besides killin' one man."

These words caused a feeling of uneasiness to come over Daniel Mount and his two sons.

The father felt in the inner pocket of his shirt to see if the two hundred and forty dollars he had been so long in saving was safe, and finding it was still there, drew his revolver to see if it was in readiness to shoot at a moment's notice.

Dick did the same, and then placing the weapon back in his belt, kept his hand upon the butt of it.

Meanwhile the rickety old vehicle kept lumbering along and darkness crept on apace.

The horses did their level best, and ten minutes later reached the brow of a steep ascent.

It was now down hill for a quarter of a mile, and then, after ascending one more steep and dangerous place, half a mile down a slight grade would fetch them to Skeleton Bar.

Night came upon them before they reached the foot of the incline, and the driver was forced to come to a halt in order to give the tired horses a slight rest before going up the hill.

The spot where they came to a stop was a dangerous, not to say picturesque, one.

The road at that point was not over fifteen feet in width, on one side of which was the wall of a cliff, and the other the brink of a precipice.

The faint light made by the stars showed the inmates of the coach what sort of a place it was, and they one and all wished they were well away from it.

After a couple of minutes' rest the driver plied the whip and started his horses.

But the instant he did so there was a sharp clatter of hoofs both ahead of the stage-coach and behind it, and fully a score of masked riders appeared on the scene.

"Throw up your hands, driver!" called out one of the newcomers, in a ringing tone. "The passengers will please step outside and hand over what valuables they have about them. The easiest way is the best for you; so step lively, now!"

If Daniel Mount and his two sons had obeyed this command it is safe to say that this story would never have been written.

But neither of the three agreed with the leader of the masked band, "that the easiest way was the best for them;" the father did not want to part with his savings without a struggle, and his sons bore him out in his resolve.

Consequently, but half a minute elapsed after they were ordered out of the stage-coach before Mount and his son, Dick, opened fire upon the robbers.

Walter was doing his part by urging the driver to go on, but that worthy knew what the consequences would be if he attempted to start the horses.

Dick and his father fired two or three shots apiece before the outlaws answered them, and when they did fire a volley two of the inmates of the stage-coach fell dead!

They were Daniel Mount and his son, Walter.

Dick seemed to bear a charmed life, for though the bullets were flying all around him, he remained unscathed, and kept on firing until he had emptied the chambers of his revolver.

But it was useless for the brave boy to fight against the demons that surrounded the vehicle. They were a desperate lot, and were determined upon accomplishing their foul purpose.

The moment Dick ceased firing a pair of them sprang into the coach, and seizing the boy dragged him out upon the ground.

Since he had seen his father and brother fall before his own eyes, the boy had been imbued with the strength and determination of a lion.

With a mighty wrench he tore himself from his captors, and drawing a hunting knife from his belt, began slashing with it right and left.

"Seize the boy!" exclaimed the captain of the masked band. "By Jove! he fights like a she-panther!"

A number of the villains rushed upon Dick, and in order to avoid them he took a couple of steps backward.

The next instant there was a crumbling of loosened earth and stones, and Dick Mount gave a cry and disappeared.

He had backed over the verge of the precipice!

"He's gone over, cap," said one of the men.

"Good enough," was the reply. "Now, a couple of you get inside and get what is there. Driver, throw down the mail bags!"

Without the least hesitation the man on the box obeyed, knowing full well what was in store for him if he refused.

Ten minutes later the bodies of the father and son inside the stage-coach had been searched by the robbers, and their weapons and the money Daniel Mount had been so long saving passed into their possession.

"Now start for Skeleton Bar as fast as you can go!" exclaimed the leader of the bandits. "Tell my inquiring friends there that Capt. Steele sends his compliments!"

The next instant the masked band galloped from the spot, and the driver whipped up his horses and proceeded on his way with his grewsome freight.

CHAPTER II.

THE GAMBLERS.

Skeleton Bar was not much of a place, as far as its size was concerned. It was merely a little mining settlement containing about fifty roughly-built shanties, and derived its name from the fact that the first one to commence working a claim there found the skeleton of a man lying in a clump of bushes.

True, it had a post office, but this was a necessity, and though the man who held the position of postmaster did not make over a hundred and fifty dollars a year out of it, he was looked upon as being a trifle above the level of the common run of the inhabitants of the "Bar."

This man bore the name of Will Duvall; he was honest, intelligent and courageous, and well liked by the majority of the miners.

A crowd was gathered about the door of the post office waiting for the mail to arrive on the same night the masked band held up the stage-coach as already described.

"'Pears ter me she is late, ain't she, Jim?" asked a big, rough-bearded man in a red shirt and corduroy trousers. "I'm a leetle anxious ter here from ther folks down in Missouri, an' I expect a letter sure on this mail."

"The stage-coach is late as sure as your name is Balsam Bob," replied the postmaster. "I hope nothing has happened."

"I wouldn't be surprised if ther blamed old rattle-box has broken down," said the man who sailed under the title of Balsam Bob. "It are 'bout time we had a new coach ter fetch our mail to us."

"You needn't worry about that wagon breakin' down," spoke up another man. "Her runnin' gear is altogether too stiff for that. It are more likely that she has been stopped an' robbed by ther same gang as did it two weeks ago."

"That might be," returned the postmaster, "but I hope——"

"Here she comes!" yelled one of the crowd. "She ain't on time, but it are better late than never!"

A minute or two later the rickety old vehicle drew up in front of the door, and the driver descended from his seat.

By the light of the single oil lamp in front of the post office the crowd could see that the man's face was very pale.

"What's the matter, Joe?" asked the postmaster.

"I was held up by that masked crowd ag'in," was the reply. "Got two corpses in ther coach, an' ther mail bags are gone!"

"What!" roared Balsam Bob, "ther mail bags gone? Why, I won't git my letter from home now."

Drawing a heavy revolver from his belt, he began stalking up and down in an excited manner.

"If I could only lay eyes on one of ther measly coyotes as did this, wouldn't I bore him full of holes!" he cried.

Meanwhile half a dozen of the men turned their attention to the stage-coach, and a minute later the bodies of Daniel Mount and his son, Walter, were tenderly carried into the post office.

Both were stone dead, and the flashing eyes of many of those rough miners told that they would like to avenge the deaths of the two passengers.

"I wonder who they are?" observed Jim Bower. "Boys, this is too bad!" Then, turning to the driver, he added:

"Didn't you have any more passengers with you, Joe?"

"Yes, there was another boy—a likely-lookin' feller, too. He was pushed over ther cliff by ther masked gang that killed his father an' brother."

"Too bad! too bad!" came from the crowd.

"Boys, this here sort of business has got ter be stopped!"

It was Balsam Bob who spoke.

"Yes," nodded the postmaster, "if we don't clean out this masked band of robbers and cutthroats, the reputation of Skeleton Bar will be ruined."

"I wonder who ther leader kin be?" said Balsam Bob. "It can't hardly be Monte Ike, ther gambler that we run outer town—he did not have enough sand in him ter turn outlaw."

"No, it ain't him," spoke up the driver. "Ther feller that seemed ter be ther captain of the gang that held me up, told me ter tell his inquirin' friends that Capt. Steel sent his compliments to them."

"He did, hey?" roared Balsam Bob; "well, I'd jist like ter run foul of him, I would!"

A shout of approval went up from the miners, which sounded like a growl more than anything else.

"We will bury these bodies in the morning, and, after that, hold a meeting to see what is to be done in the matter," said the postmaster.

This being satisfactory to all hands, the crowd quickly dispersed.

Balsam Bob made his way to one of the liquor saloons of the place, and, after "wetting up," went into a room adjoining the bar.

The man was honest, rough and daring, but he had a weakness for gambling, and that was why he visited this particular saloon.

Two or three tables were in the room, and around one of these four men were seated playing cards.

They were all miners, and varied in age from twenty-five to fifty years.

Balsam Bob got permission to enter the game, and soon he was so much absorbed in it that he forgot all about the robbery and murder the masked band had committed an hour before.

For three hours the big miner sat at the table, with varying success.

One by one the men dropped out, until only one was left, and he refused to play unless they could get some one to come in and make it three-handed.

The other tables were occupied, but there were half a dozen loiterers about the room, and fixing his eyes upon these, Balsam Bob roared out:

"Who wants ter take a piece of this? I've got a couple of hundred I don't mind losin'; speak out lively now!"

"I'll take a hand," spoke up a medium-sized, well-formed man of thirty. "I am a stranger here, but I like an honest game of cards any time."

"You're welcome, my huckleberry! Sail in!" exclaimed the big miner, kicking out a chair for him to sit on.

The stranger promptly sat down, and the game commenced.

It seemed that Balsam Bob was in an extraordinary run of luck that night, for he kept winning until at length he was over five hundred dollars ahead.

It was pretty late by this time, and nearly all the gamblers had left for their shanties.

"You have won quite a pile, friend," observed the stranger, who had lost heavily. "I wish I was as lucky as you. Suppose we play for a little higher stake?"

"I'm your huckleberry!" replied Balsam Bob, and the other player agreeing, the stakes were doubled.

But Balsam Bob kept on winning as before, and half an hour later he had won a thousand instead of five hundred.

"I never saw such luck in my life," said the stranger. "I don't care to play cards any more; suppose we throw dice for a hundred dollars a side."

"Trot out the dice!" roared the miner. "I'm ready for anything. I allus want ter give a man a show ter git his money back."

The dice box was produced, and the pair began throwing, the other player having dropped out.

The stranger won the first time, and then Balsam Bob won three times in succession.

Then the stranger won again, and the miner captured the stakes twice.

His luck had not deserted him, and he did some wonderful throwing.

At last the stranger got up in a disgusted manner.

"I have enough for to-night," said he. "I will try you again when you haven't so much luck with you."

"I'm over two thousand ahead!" exclaimed Balsam Bob, "an' I'd give every cent of it if I could meet a certain feller jist now."

"Who would you like to meet?" asked the stranger, coolly.

"Capt. Steel, ther leader of the gang of cutthroats that

held up ther stage-coach to-night an scooped up ther mail bags, in which there oughter been a letter for me."

With the quickness of a cat the stranger whipped out a brace of revolvers and, backing against the wall, exclaimed:

"Hand over the two thousand! I am Capt. Steel!"

CHAPTER III.

DICK FALLS IN THE HANDS OF FRIENDS.

When Dick Mount felt himself going over the cliff he gave himself up for lost.

He had been so engrossed in trying to avenge the deaths of his father and brother that he did not stop to think of the narrow, dangerous place the stage-coach had halted upon.

Down he went for many feet, and then his body crashed into a tree-top with such force as to render him unconscious.

But he did not stop here, for the limbs giving way from the effect of the sudden shock, allowed him to go on down for a distance of about ten feet, when he landed on a narrow ledge of rock.

It was several minutes before he opened his eyes, and when he did so it took him some time to remember what had happened.

When he did realize the position he was in he arose to a sitting posture and soon found that no bones were broken, though he was badly shaken up and considerably bruised.

"The fiends!" he exclaimed. "If I live to get away from this place it shall be my duty to never cease until I bring that masked band to justice! They shot my father and poor sick brother down before my eyes, and their cruel death must be avenged."

The boy burst into tears after he made this declaration, but he soon wiped them away and arose to his feet upon the ledge.

"The tree saved me from a certain death," he muttered, as he looked about him, for he could see fairly well by aid of the stars.

A glance below showed him that the bottom of the ravine was not over twenty feet distant, and he promptly looked for some means of getting there.

To his right he dimly observed a cluster of vines, which were rooted in the ground at the base of the cliff, and he promptly seized them and tested their strength.

"They will hold my weight, I guess," he thought. "Now to go down and find my way to Skeleton Bar."

Swinging lightly from the ledge, he began descending by means of the vines.

He reached the ground in safety, and then, with a sigh

of relief, he arranged his clothing and prepared to leave the ravine.

Unfortunately he had lost his revolver, which must have fallen somewhere in the ravine, and as he did not think it advisable to light a match to search for it, he set out on a brisk walk in the same direction in which the stage-coach had been going before the attack.

"I have a few dollars in my pockets," he muttered; "and will be able to buy what weapons I need, if nothing more."

For ten minutes he walked along, and then, coming to a place where he could ascend from the ravine, he concluded to do so.

Dick was now confident that he would get to Skeleton Bar in a short time.

The first thing he intended to do on arriving there was to report the attack on the stage-coach, and get some men to go back to the spot with him, for he thought it quite probable that the driver had been killed, and that the vehicle was still there.

It was tedious work climbing the steep ascent, and the boy was compelled to pause for breath before he reached the level above.

At length he arrived at a little plateau that was thickly covered with a growth of trees and shrubs, and though he could not see much of the surroundings on account of the darkness, it struck him that it was a pretty wild sort of a spot.

Coming to a halt, Dick peered about him, undecided which way to turn.

Suddenly he caught sight of a light shining through the trees a few yards ahead of him.

"That must come from a house," he thought. "Well, I will go and investigate. Perhaps I have reached the outskirts of Skeleton Bar."

Quickly, but silently, the boy made his way in the direction of the light.

The next minute he beheld a rude log cabin built upon the very center of the plateau.

Something told Dick that it was safe for him to apply for admission, so he walked boldly to the door and gave a knock.

It was opened a moment later by a middle-aged man, who, after scrutinizing the boy carefully, said:

"Good-evening, young man. Do you want ter see me?"

"I am looking for a friend," returned Dick. "I am alone and unarmed, and know no one in this vicinity. If you will kindly let me in and listen to my story you will no doubt sympathize with me, if you can do no more."

"Come in, boy!" and as the man spoke he threw the door wide open.

Dick stepped inside and saw two women seated at a rough table, engaged in patching some garments.

The scene was so homelike that he felt drawn to the humble inmates of the lone cabin on the mountain side, and almost before he was aware of it he sunk wearily upon a stool and burst into a flood of tears.

"What is the matter, father?" asked the younger of the two girls, rising to her feet.

She was a girl of sixteen, as beautiful as a picture, and of the form of a goddess—at least that is what Dick thought as he surveyed her through his tears.

"A stranger has applied for admission, and I let him in, Ida," replied the man. "He seems to be in trouble, and will no doubt tell us all about it soon. In the meantime you can prepare something for him to eat, for the chances are he is hungry."

At this the girl immediately began to bustle about, and the other, who was probably five or six years her senior, promptly arose and assisted her.

"I am Peter Benham, and these are my daughters, Jane and Ida," said the man to Dick.

The boy arose and bowed politely to the girls.

"I am Dick Mount," he quickly replied. "And now, with your permission, I will tell you how I came to reach your home."

"Go ahead, young man, while the girls are gettin' you somethin' to eat."

In as few words as possible Dick related what had occurred on the mountain side.

"Too bad—too bad!" exclaimed Peter Benham, in a tone of genuine sympathy. "I have suffered, my boy, and I know what your feelings are."

"I shall never rest until the murderers of my father and brother have paid the penalty of their crimes!" cried Dick, with flashing eyes.

"And I'll help you hunt 'em down!" added Benham. "I've been living the life of a recluse, lad, for the past eight years, and now that a band of robbers has taken up its quarters around here, it is time I got active again. My two girls here can handle a pistol or rifle as well as I, and they'll help you all they can, won't you, girls?"

"Certainly!" exclaimed the younger of the two. "Just let me draw bead on one of the masked band once, and when my rifle cracks his life will go out like the snuff of a candle!"

Dick gazed at the fair speaker with a feeling of intermingled surprise and admiration.

He had never heard such words from a girl before, much less from one so beautiful as she, but when he realized that the old man and his daughters had lived in that wild section for eight years, there was nothing really strange in what Ida Benham said.

Half an hour later the boy sat down to a steaming meal, and, being very hungry, he ate heartily.

"Now, my boy, if you will take my advice you'll stay

right here till morning," observed Benham as Dick got up from the table.

"But I should like to go back to the spot where the stage-coach was held up," said Dick.

"You'll find nothing there. As soon as they got what they wanted, the masked band most likely ordered the driver to go on, and the whole outfit is in Skeleton Bar long before this."

"If you think such is the case, I will do as you say, and stay with you till morning. I have enough money to pay you for the trouble I am putting you and the young ladies to."

"You will pay nothing!" exclaimed Benham. "I never charge an honest person anything for doing them a good turn."

The log cabin was not a very pretentious building. It contained but two small rooms and a loft, which was occupied by the girls.

Benham had a quantity of skins from the wild animals he had slain, and with some of these he made a couch for Dick in his own room.

An hour or so later the door was securely barred, and all turned in for the night.

Early the next morning the boy was ready to go to Skeleton Bar, which was but half a mile below, by a near cut.

Benham had a good supply of weapons and ammunition on hand, and he soon fitted Dick out with a rifle and revolver, for which he would not take a cent.

"I'll go down with you," he said; "I've got to get a few things from the store. The girls can take care of the shanty well enough."

Dick bade the girls good-by, and then started down the mountain path with Benham.

A few minutes later they came in sight of the little mining town, which looked very picturesque, nestling in the valley.

"There is Skeleton Bar," observed the old man; "it ain't much of a place, but it is a lively one, I can tell you!"

As they reached the valley they came upon a number of miners who were digging a grave.

Close by two bodies lay, and, rushing forward, Dick saw that they were his murdered father and brother!

CHAPTER IV.

THE BRANDED BOY.

"Hand over the two thousand dollars, I said!" cried the stranger. "Be quick about it, too, or it will begin to rain lead!"

The inmates of the room were knocked speechless with astonishment, and no one was more so than Balsam Bob.

Could it be possible that this man was really Capt. Steel, the leader of the masked band?

The big miner no sooner asked himself this question than he was satisfied that such was the case.

One of the stranger's revolvers was leveled directly at his heart, and being a sensible, as well as a brave man, Balsam Bob hurriedly produced the money and handed it over.

"That shows your good sense, my friend," observed the outlaw captain; "put it in my pocket for me."

The miner obeyed in a sullen manner.

The next instant the audacious stranger fired three shots in succession, and the lights in the room were extinguished in double-quick time.

Then Balsam Bob received a blow in the face that caused him to fall to the floor, and with a leap that cleared his prostrate body, Capt. Steel made for the door.

The few men in the place were afraid to shoot for fear of hitting each other, and before a light had been struck the outlaw had disappeared!

"Hook me for a sucker!" exclaimed Balsam Bob, staggering to his feet as one of the men lighted a match. "That is the worst I was ever taken in—by dad if it ain't!"

"That feller was a putty soon one," retorted one of the miners.

"Let's git arter him!" yelled Balsam Bob, who was now as mad as a hornet. "He can't be far away yet."

Out of the saloon he rushed, with the men at his heels, but, look any way he chose, not a glimpse could he catch of the outlaw captain.

"This beats pizen!" he ejaculated. "Who would ever have thought that coyote was Capt. Steel?"

"No one," echoed his companions.

"Ther next time we meet I reckon things will be a leetle different," and, consoling himself with this thought, the big miner made his way in the direction of his shanty.

The population of Skeleton Bar was astir very early the next morning. Instead of going to their work, the miners stood about in knots, talking over the startling events of the night before.

The robbery of the mail-coach was enough to create lots of excitement among them, but the nerve and coolness of the captain of the masked band, who dared to introduce himself in a saloon, was a little too much for them.

After a while they formed into a procession and made their way to the post office, where the two bodies lay.

Will Duvall, who was a sort of leader among them, selected six men to go and dig a grave for the victims of the masked band to lie in.

Balsam Bob was one of these, and, getting out a stretcher, he, with the assistance of the others, placed the bodies upon it.

Then the postmaster spoke a few words in lieu of a funeral service, while the crowd listened with bared heads.

When this was over, the six miners picked up their grewsome burden and started for the outskirts of the town, where a little cemetery had been started at about the same time Skeleton Bar came into existence.

There were few men lying there who had not met with a violent death, for brawls and shooting scrapes had been frequent occurrences in the history of the Bar.

When a spot was selected the gravediggers began their work, and in a short time they were ready to make the interment.

It was just at this time that Dick Mount and Peter Benham arrived on the scene, and when the boy knelt by his dead relatives and gave vent to his grief, more than one brawny miner brushed away a tear.

Dick did not attempt to interfere with what the men were doing, and when the last shovelful of dirt had been heaped upon the two mounds, he faced the men and said:

"Gentlemen, I thank you for your kindness in burying my dead. This has been a sad blow to me, but I am young and may recover from it. I promise you, though, that it shall be my duty not to leave Skeleton Bar until I have hunted the murderous band down and brought them to justice!"

"You're a noble lad!" exclaimed Balsam Bob, seizing the boy by the hand and shaking it warmly, "an' I promise you that I will do all in my power ter help you; an' so will all of us; won't we, lads?"

"We will!" cried the miners in unison.

Back to the shanty post office they went, Dick and Benham going with them.

Two hours later a vigilance committee of fifty was organized, with Balsam Bob as leader.

"What are you goin' ter do ter make a livin' while you stop in Skeleton Bar?" asked the big miner, addressing Dick, a short time after.

"I hardly know," was the reply. "I must look for work somewhere."

"I'll give you a job ter work on my claim, which are one of the best in these here diggin's, an' if you show yourself ter be good an' willin' I'll sell you a third share in it."

"Thank you!" exclaimed Dick, warmly. "I will accept your offer without looking any further."

A week passed by. Dick got along immensely at his work, and his employer was more than pleased with him.

Not a trace had been seen or heard from the masked band since the eventful night when the coach was held up, though the vigilance committee had used every effort to find them, even sending out twelve men in the stage-coach lying in its bottom to act as a decoy on three different occasions.

Dick had visited the Benham cabin several times during

this period, always receiving a warm welcome when he did so.

On the evening of the tenth day after his arrival at the Bar he concluded to make a tour of investigation on his own hook, and see if he could not find where the hidden headquarters of the outlaw band were located.

"These men here are honest and well-meaning enough, but I think they go at it in the wrong way," he muttered; "the masked band's hiding place can be found only by cunning and strategy, in my opinion, and if I can find it I will be able to lead them there and make quick work of the business."

He did not desire Balsam Bob to know what he was up to, so, watching his chance, shortly after darkness set in he started in the direction of the place where the stage-coach had been held up.

The distance was not great, so he soon reached it.

The moon was just rising as he made his way up the mountain, and its mellow light made the clefts of rock and the steep cliffs look weird and ghostly.

Just beyond the dangerous place where the road ran along the brink of the chasm he came to a narrow defile that appeared to lead to the very heart of the mountain.

This place had been thoroughly scoured by members of the vigilance committee with unsatisfactory results, but the boy had an idea that it was a fit place for the outlaws to seclude themselves.

He carried a brace of revolvers in his belt, and examining them to see if they were ready for instant use, he stepped softly into the defile and made his way cautiously along.

He had not walked a dozen steps when he heard a slight noise behind him.

He turned as quick as a flash, and saw two men who wore black masks almost upon him.

The brave boy endeavored to raise his revolver, but before he could do so the men sprang upon him.

He gave one call for help, but that was all, for, being big, burly fellows, the men soon overpowered him and smothered his cries.

"It are about time we put a stop ter people sneakin' around here," one of them said. "Here, Jack, blindfold him, an' we'll take him ter headquarters an' see what ther captain says we had better do with him."

"Good enough," retorted his companion; and, though Dick struggled bravely to get away from them, the proposition was carried out to the very letter.

With his hands tied behind him and blindfolded and gagged, Dick Mount was conducted down the defile for a couple of hundred yards, and then his captors came to a halt.

After listening to make sure that no one had followed

them, one of them struck a sharp blow upon the ground with the heel of his boot.

A sharp, metallic ring was heard, and then the ground gave way beneath the feet of the three, and they went downward like a flash!

They came to a stop about twelve feet beneath the surface, and then, stepping aside, the piece of earth, or what seemed to be such, went up to the level above like a flash.

Dick Mount had found the hidden retreat of the Masked Band of Skeleton Bar, but the prospects before him were not very bright.

Along a short passage the two outlaws conducted him, and a minute later a door swung open, disclosing a well-lighted, roomy apartment, in which a score or more of men were lounging.

"What have we here?" cried a man, who was no other than Capt. Steel. "A boy! Who is it, men?"

"We found him sneakin' about in ther defile, as though he was lookin' for somethin', so we thought we'd better bring him in an' let you take a look at him," replied one of the men who had made the capture.

"You did well. Take the bandage from his eyes and let us see what he looks like."

The next minute the command was obeyed, and Dick stood blinking like an owl under the strong light of the lamps that illumined the scene.

"What is your name, boy?" demanded the outlaw captain.

"Dick Mount," returned the boy, fearlessly. "I am the boy who fell over the precipice the other night when you villains murdered my father and brother."

At these words Capt. Steel gave a start.

"Mount, did you say? Where is your birthplace?"

"Topeka, Kan."

Again the villain started.

After a silence of fully a minute he fixed his eyes on those of the captive and said:

"Boy, I was going to kill you at first, but I have changed my mind. I am going to brand you with the trade mark of your country, and send you back to Kansas!"

Dick could not tell what the man was driving at, but he had been told he was not to be killed, and that caused him to keep up his courage.

"Bring out that branding iron and heat it red-hot!" exclaimed the captain to one of his men.

The next moment an iron that had once been used by the United States troops to brand cavalry ponies was produced and placed in the glowing embers of a fire that was burning on a rudely constructed hearth in a corner of the place.

"Strip the boy to the waist!"

At this command, Dick turned pale, and his heart began to beat like a trip hammer.

He tried vainly to resist the men, and two minutes later his body was bared to the waist.

Then his hands were drawn above his head and securely tied to a ring in the rocky wall.

"Is the iron hot?" asked Capt. Steel.

"It is," replied one of the men.

"Bring it here!"

With quivering lips the boy looked over his shoulder and saw one of the men approaching with a branding iron, upon which, in glowing letters of fire, were the characters:

"U. S."

Without a word Capt. Steel seized the red-hot iron and thrust it between the shoulder blades of Dick—against the bare, quivering flesh!

For fully half a minute he kept it there, while the living flesh hissed and smoked, and then, as he drew it away—Dick fainted!

CHAPTER V.

THE LITTLE LAWYER FROM TENNESSEE.

A deathly silence followed the branding of Dick Mount. Even the rough, lawless men, who were used to all sorts of cruelties, seemed appalled for a moment at the horrible action.

"Cut him down!" commanded Capt. Steel, breaking the silence.

Half a dozen willing hands flew to do his bidding, and the next minute the boy was lying stretched upon the floor.

One of the outlaws, who had a spark of pity in his breast, allowed a few drops of brandy to trickle down the unconscious lad's throat, and he opened his eyes.

"You are the Branded Boy!" exclaimed the leader of the masked band. "Get upon your feet and put on your clothes."

Dick obeyed almost instantly.

As he arose, the outlaws crowded behind him to see how his back looked.

As plain as the alphabet in a child's primer were the letters, "U. S."

The reader no doubt knows how painful a burn is—even a slight one, for that matter; but to have a red-hot iron thrust against the bare skin until it burned into the depth of nearly a quarter of an inch—that was more than painful!

No wonder, then, that Dick Mount fainted.

But he did not make the least complaint after the ordeal was over. He put on his garments in silence, and then fixed his eyes upon the captain, waiting for the next command.

"Blindfold him and lead him to the spot where you captured him," said that worthy. "He understands what

is required of him, and will no doubt go back to Kansas as fast as he can travel."

"That I will not do," returned Dick, quietly. "I will stay at Skeleton Bar until I have hunted down the murderers of my father and brother, or until I meet the same fate they did!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed Capt. Steel. "Boy, I like your spirit, but you will take my advice and leave this wild section of country forever. I promise you faithfully, if you are again brought before me, you will die! Remember that. Away with him, men! There is no danger of his leading the miners to our snug retreat. Satan and all his imps could not find the secret entrance if they searched about the defile from now until eternity!"

A bandage was securely tied about the boy's eyes, and the same two men who had brought him there started away with him.

Contrary to his expectations, they did not take him out by the way they came in.

There was a quick walk of five minutes, and then, without ascending or going down, they came into the open air.

Three minutes later the hoodwink was removed, and Dick saw, as near as he could judge, that he was in almost the exact spot he had been when the outlaws sprang upon him.

"Good-night!" exclaimed one of the men. "Be sure an' do what ther captain said."

Without a word Dick walked in the direction of the mouth of the defile.

As he had been divested of his weapons, it was policy to keep still, and he was wise enough to do so.

When he reached the mouth of the narrow place he turned and saw that the two outlaws had disappeared in the darkness.

"I must mark this spot," he muttered. "I will come here again, if I die for it!"

Searching about, he found a loose piece of rock that lay in a crack of the perpendicular wall.

It was but the work of a moment to remove this, and then tearing off one of the buttons from his coat, the branded boy placed it in the crack and put the piece of rock back in its place.

Satisfied with what he had done, he turned his footsteps in the direction of the Bar.

It was not very late when he arrived at the shanty of his boss, and finding that Balsam Bob was not in, he proceeded to dress his smarting back as best he could, after which he turned in.

In spite of the pain he suffered the branded boy managed to sleep fairly well, and it was not until the next morning that he informed the big miner of what he had passed through in the outlaws' den.

"Great snakes!" cried Balsam Bob, as he surveyed the letters on the boy's back. "How you ever stood it, lad, I don't know. Ther measly band of coyotes'll suffer for this—see if they don't! Kin you lead ther way to ther hangout?"

"I can take you to within a few feet of the spot where it is located," replied Dick.

"Come on down to ther post office, then. We'll see what Bill Duvall thinks about this business."

The two quickly made their way to the post office, and Dick bared his back for inspection and related his adventure of the night before.

The miners glared at the branded boy in mute astonishment. They had never heard of such a thing before, and they made up their minds that the captain of the masked band must be a fiend incarnate.

While they were talking over the matter a stranger elbowed his way through the crowd and asked permission to look at the brand on Dick's back.

He was a shrew-looking, wiry little man of fifty years, apparently, and had arrived at Skeleton Bar the night before.

"I am a stranger here, gentlem'en," he said; "but as I have come here to locate, I would like to know something about this gang of outlaws that have been causing so much trouble around here of late. Gentlemen, I am Ned Rank, a broken-down lawyer from Kentucky."

"Sart'inly, stranger," returned Balsam Bob. "This boy are Dick Mount, who was in ther den of coyotes last night, an' was branded with a red-hot iron by ther captain; he'll tell yer all about it."

Ned Rank put out his hand to Dick who shook it in a friendly manner.

"Young man, I like your make-up," said he. "If I can be of any help in getting square on these outlaws I'll do it for nothing. I am a lawyer, you know."

"Thank you," retorted the boy. "I believe you are sincere in what you say, Mr. Rank."

The little man bowed and lifted his hat at this compliment, which action caused the majority of the miners to laugh.

"Rank, if yer come out to Skeleton Bar to practice law, I'm afraid yer will git left. A lawyer chap is not the sort of a huckleberry for these here diggin's, unless he knows how ter handle a pickax an' kin shoot ther buttons off a feller's coat without spoilin' ther garment."

"Oh, that's all right," observed Rank, with a twinkle in his gray eyes. "I am pretty well up in the things you mention."

"You don't look like as though you could do much of anything," spoke up a one-eyed miner, who had a bad reputation at the Bar. "Strikes me that you're ther worst-lookin' specimen of a tenderfoot I've seen in a dog's age."

"Do you mean that for an insult or a joke?" calmly asked the lawyer.

"You kin take it anyway you like," was the retort, in a bullying tone.

"Step outside the crowd, and I'll make you dance for the amusement of our friends!" exclaimed Ned Rank, pushing his way to a clear spot.

With a snort of rage the insulting miner, who gloried in the name of Single-Eye Max, drew his revolver and followed the little man.

A brawl was an almost everyday occurrence at Skeleton Bar, and if a man got killed in what they called a "square fight," they thought no more of it than if he had died of the delirium tremens.

But if a murder or a robbery was committed it was different. They were just as anxious to bring the offender to a speedy justice as any inhabitant of the East.

Dick was in a position where he could see the whole thing, and the thought came to him that Rank was either a fool or a very smart man.

"Git a grave ready for another tenderfoot!" roared the one-eyed man. "I'm a roarer from Roarertown, an' when I shoot somethin' drops!"

The next instant something did drop, but it was not the little lawyer from Kentucky.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE HORN OF PLENTY.

Ned Rank had no sooner faced Single-Eye Max than, with the quickness of a cat, he leaped forward like a human battering-ram, and knocked him flat upon his back. The little lawyer's head struck the bully's stomach with such terrific force that it caused him to double up like a jackknife and drop his revolver.

A roar of laughter followed this unexpected incident, which served to make the one-eyed man madder than ever.

Rank picked up the fallen man's revolver, and, handing it to him, said:

"Get up at once. I am going to make you dance."

As he spoke he drew his own revolver and covered the bully.

Single-Eye Max's anger now turned to fear, and with a pale face he arose.

"Now dance for the amusement of the crowd!" commanded Rank.

"Hold on, stranger, I was only foolin' with you. You don't mean that you want me ter dance, do you?" whined the coward.

"Dance!" almost shouted the little man; and to emphasize his command he fired a shot and lodged a bullet into the heel of the bully's boot.

That was enough! If Single-Eye Max had never danced in his life before he did it then.

To help him along Rank kept firing until he had emptied the six chambers of his revolver.

"Now you can stop," said he, calmly; and as the big bully sank upon the ground, almost exhausted, he added:

"Look at the heels of your boots; you will find that three bullets hit each of them."

Several of the miners hastened forward and made an examination.

"You're right!" one of them cried. "You a tenderfoot! Oh, no! Wish I could shoot like that."

"Mr. Rank, you are what I call a fust-class huckleberry that has never been picked," observed Balsam Bob. "We'll put you on ther list as legal adviser of the wigilance committee, if you'll allow us."

"Certainly," responded the lawyer; "anything to be agreeable. I expect to stay in Skeleton Bar some little time, and I want to be friendly with all honest men."

"Come on down to ther Horn of Plenty, an' we'll all liquor up!" shouted the big miner, enthusiastically.

"Thank you," said Rank, "not just now. I think I have some ointment in my satchel that will relieve the pain from the boy's burned back, and heal it up quicker."

The little man had such a way of speaking that when he once said a thing, his hearers took it for granted that he meant it.

So Balsam Bob did not ask him a second time, but led the procession to the nearest saloon, which its enterprising proprietor had named the Horn of Plenty.

Even Single-Eye Max went along, and soon the front of the post office was deserted of all, save our hero, Will Duvall and Rank.

"Come inside," said the postmaster, "and see what you can do for the boy's horrible burn."

Dick and Rank followed to his little office in the rear of the building, and once more the branded boy bared his back.

The little lawyer made a careful examination, and then said:

"Young man, you will carry that mark to your grave. The letters might be obliterated by an operation, but I should advise you to let them be as they are."

"That's it exactly," spoke up Will Duvall. "No one need know he is branded unless he chooses to tell them. Anyhow, U. S. stands for United States, and that isn't so bad."

"When the masked band has been hunted down and its members brought to justice, I will have the brand to remind me that I left no stone unturned to avenge the deaths of my father and my brother," observed Dick, quietly.

Rank produced a tin box containing some ointment from his satchel, and carefully dressed the wound.

The stuff had a soothing effect upon the burn, and Dick felt much relieved in consequence.

"I feel as good as I ever did now," said he. "I am ready to lead the vigilance committee to the spot where I was captured at any time now."

"As legal adviser of the committee, I would suggest that you should do nothing of the kind for a few days. If we keep quiet the outlaws will be led to believe that you do not intend to bother them," returned the lawyer.

"I guess you are right!" exclaimed Dick and the post-master in a breath.

After a while Rank proposed that the branded boy should go with him to the Horn of Plenty saloon to see what the miners were doing, and though he had no liking for places of that kind, Dick went with him.

Somehow he regarded Ned Rank as one of the best friends he had in the world, and he put the utmost confidence in him.

That his confidence was not misplaced will be found out later on.

As the pair neared the place the little lawyer whispered in Dick's ear:

"Something tells me that the captain of the masked band is going to pay this shanty a visit before we come out. I think I will be able to recognize him when he comes in, and in case such a thing happens I'll give you the wink. Then you must look out."

"Why do you think you would recognize him?" asked the branded boy. "Have you ever seen him?"

"Never in my life, but he has been described to me."

"It strikes me that you have been sent out here to capture Capt. Steel!" exclaimed Dick, with brightening eyes.

"Never mind how it strikes you. Don't say anything more about what you think, either to me or anybody else. I am Ned Rank, a broken-down lawyer from Kentucky, and I came out here to make my fortune at the mines."

"I won't say another word," returned the boy.

However, he could not help doing lots of thinking just then.

Half a minute later the two walked into the saloon in an unconcerned manner.

It was the same place in which Balsam Bob had been so neatly tricked by Capt. Steel, and the big miner was speaking of the occurrence when Dick and his companion entered.

"Here comes the branded boy!" yelled Balsam Bob, changing the subject instantly. "Here is the only pusson alive, outside of one of their members, as has ever been in the ther secret headquarters of the masked band. Step up an' drink to his health, boys!"

The obliging bartender quickly supplied the drinks, and the crowd drank them with a cheer for Dick.

"Now, have a round with me!" exclaimed a man, push-

ing his way to the bar. "I just heard a remark that this boy was the only one in the crowd who had been in the den of the masked band. That is wrong, gentlemen, for I have been there myself, and, I am happy to say, got out with a whole skin!"

"Who in thunder are you?" asked Balsam Bob, stepping forward.

"Gentlemen, I am a government detective," said the stranger, throwing open his coat and disclosing a badge. "I was sent here to run down this masked band that has been robbing the mails of late, and I am glad to say that I have already located the retreat of the outlaws, and been inside of it."

The speaker was a well-formed man, attired in ordinary dress, and his manner showed that he was used to all sorts of company.

Dick "sized" him up carefully, and came to the conclusion that he was pretty "fresh," even if he was in the employ of the government.

The man's sudden appearance and his words astonished the crowd, and for a minute or two no one said anything.

The bartender, however, had an eye for business, and he soon had the drinks on the bar.

With a "Here's ter yer health!" the miners drank, and then, waiting until the man had paid for the round, Ned Rank stepped forward.

In a tone that was as cool as a twilight breeze in autumn, he exclaimed:

"Stranger, I believe you are a fraud!"

CHAPTER VII.

IDA BENHAM IS CAPTURED.

At about the same hour the events described in the last chapter took place, six rough-looking men were making their way along the mountain side in the direction of the lonely cabin of Peter Benham.

All of them wore heavy beards, and by their general appearance they were villains.

"I wonder why ther captain sent us to do this job in broad daylight?" observed one of them, in a low tone, to his companions.

"I don't know," replied the fellow nearest him. "I suppose he knows his own business best."

"What in blazes does he want with ther gal, anyhow?" spoke up another.

"He's fell in love, most likely."

Each one of the party nodded, as though this was about the size of it, and then nothing was said until they came in sight of the lone cabin.

They came to a halt behind a clump of rocks, and then

each man drew a black mask from his pocket and adjusted it over his face.

A moment later they began sneaking in single file toward the little house.

When the foremost was within twenty-five yards of it a rather startling thing occurred.

The door of the cabin opened, and Ida Benham stepped upon the threshold with a rifle in her hands.

As coolly as though she were shooting at a mark she drew bead upon the leading man and pulled the trigger.

As the report rang out the villain threw up his hands and dropped dead.

Then, in a ringing tone that was full of earnestness, the girl exclaimed:

"Go back where you came from, you sneaking cowards, or I'll shoot you all dead in your tracks!"

The villains were so astonished and dismayed at what had happened that they remained speechless.

They had come there to capture the girl, but she had captured them instead!

"I don't know what you are sneaking around here for," went on the spirited mountain girl, "but I do know that you are here for no good. I promised that I would shoot the first one I saw of the masked band, and I have kept my word. Go away now, or some of the rest of you will go down!"

"You made a mistake in us, miss," returned one of the men. "We meant no harm to you."

"What would six men be sneaking round with masks on their faces for if they didn't mean to rob or murder somebody?"

"See here," observed the man who had spoken, turning to his companions, "we've got ter spread out an' git that gal, even if we all go under but one. You know what it would be if we went back to headquarters without her."

"You're right," was the response of the villains.

"Are you going to move?" demanded Ida Benham, impatiently.

"Yes," was the outlaw's reply.

Then he told his companions to draw back out of sight, and spread out until they surrounded the cabin.

Picking up the body of their slain comrade, they started away, and the girl was deceived into thinking her victory was complete.

Old man Benham had gone down to the Bar on some errand, leaving his two daughters in charge of the cabin, as he had often done before.

While her sister did the work about the house, Ida kept a watch on their outside surroundings, for since the masked band had become such a terror in that section she had been worried not a little.

Somehow she could not help connecting the villainous

gang with a good-looking hunter who had annoyed her considerably a month or two previous, and who had, on her refusal to marry him, disappeared with the promise that he would return and win her for his bride in spite of herself.

The girl detested this man, who was known as Le Grand Meyster, and her opinion of him was that he was a consummate scoundrel.

No wonder, then, that she thought of him when the masked band came to locate in that vicinity.

The brave girl saw the outlaws sneaking toward the cabin, and the instant she became aware that they were masked she got her rifle ready.

Her beautiful eyes flashed fire, and she resolved that they would never enter the cabin.

Having been brought up in a wild country, she did not think it any harm to shoot down a man who wore a mask to conceal his features.

When the others went away she entered the cabin with an air of triumph.

"It is all right now, Jane," said she. "I drove them away easily enough."

"What can they be doing around here?" asked her sister, anxiously. "Can it be that they want to destroy our little home?"

"They had better not try anything of the kind—not while I can see them."

"I am afraid we shall have no end of trouble now, and shall advise father to move down to the Bar."

"Probably he will," answered Ida. "He seems to take more interest in things down there than he used to."

Both girls were looking out of the open door as they conversed. Ida had placed her rifle in a corner, and was now unarmed.

Suddenly they beheld one of the masked men running toward the cabin as fast as his legs could carry him.

Ida gave a cry of alarm, and ran for her rifle, and her sister followed her example by taking down another that hung upon the wall.

The younger of the two stepped to the door, determined to shoot the approaching man as she had done one of his companions a few minutes before.

The moment the brave girl appeared in the doorway the advancing outlaw dropped to the ground behind a bowlder.

Bent upon getting a shot at the audacious scoundrel, Ida stepped from the cabin.

She would have done much better if she had gone inside and barred the door.

The instant she emerged from the door there was a quick pattering of footsteps, and a man sprang around each corner of the cabin.

Before she could raise her rifle to defend herself they were upon her.

She uttered one scream to her sister for help, and then a brawny hand was thrust over her mouth.

Her captors uttered a hoarse laugh, and darted away with her. Jane Benham, in the doorway of the cabin, with a rifle in her hands, dared not fire upon the masked villains for fear of hitting her sister.

On hurried the two outlaws until they reached a clump of rocks, behind which two of their companions awaited them.

"We've done mighty well," exclaimed the man who had conceived the scheme to effect the girl's capture. "Now we'll light out for headquarters!"

At that moment the fellow who had acted as a decoy joined them, and then the five started off, leaving the body of the outlaw Ida had shot in a hole, where they had hastily covered it over with dirt and stones.

They made a short cut over the wild mountain side, and in less than half an hour reached the defile that led to the secret hiding place of the masked band.

As luck would have it, not a soul saw them, and, making doubly sure that there was no one about the defile, they reached the spot where the elevator was located and came to a halt upon it.

One of them gave the necessary signal, and almost instantly they sank from sight.

A moment later they stepped into the underground passage, and the block of stone, which was so neatly covered with dirt and moss, assumed its former position.

The whole thing was worked by means of a powerful lever that could easily be manipulated by one man.

"Now, my putty lass, you kin yell all you want ter," said one of the outlaws, with a mocking laugh. "You are in ther home of Capt. Steel."

Ida made no reply, but that she was really frightened almost out of her senses there was no doubt.

CHAPTER VIII.

LE GRAND MEYSTER.

"You are a fraud!" repeated Ned Rank.

"What do you mean?" asked the stranger, advancing a step nearer.

"What I say," returned the little lawyer, calmly. "You claim to have been inside the den of the masked band. I will go a little further! If you have been there, you were there as one of their number!"

The accused man's eyes flashed and his face paled slightly, but he did not make a move to spring upon Rank, or even draw a revolver.

After a few seconds silence he calmly turned to the crowd, and said:

"Gentlemen, if it were not for the fact of this fellow being so little and insignificant in appearance, I would have dropped him in his tracks for insulting me. I did not think I was going to make anybody mad when I said I had been in the outlaws' secret quarters. I was a prisoner there, like this boy, only I did not suffer the misfortune of being branded. I am a gentleman, and I can figure in any society, from a high-toned ballroom to a poker game!"

Some of the miners took sides with the man, and one of them asked him his name.

"Some of you ought to know me," was his reply. "I have been at Skeleton Bar before. I am Le Grand Meyster, the young man who was enjoying himself hunting and prospecting in this vicinity a month or six weeks ago."

"You are right!" exclaimed one of the miners; "but you have grown an awful beard since that time."

"I have, indeed. All my family are noted for the luxuriant whiskers they sport, so I thought I would let mine grow. Come and have another drink, gentlemen!"

The lawyer had not uttered a word since Le Grand Meyster had called him little and insignificant—in fact, he did not appear to take what was said of him as an insult at all, and walked up to the bar and took his drink along with the rest of them.

Dick took a cigar, which cost twenty-five cents, each time a round was served. He was not much of a smoker, but he did not care to drink the fiery liquor sold in Skeleton Bar.

He had been an interested listener to all that had been said, and he could not imagine what the little lawyer was driving at.

"He must suspect that man to be one of the outlaws," he thought.

As soon as the glasses had been emptied and the round paid for, Le Grand Meyster spoke again.

"Gentlemen, what is the matter with having a little game of cards?"

"I'm your huckleberry!" promptly exclaimed Balsam Bob.

"And I'll take a hand," added Rank, much to the surprise of our hero.

No one else spoke, so the three made their way into the cardroom.

Dick and a number of the miners followed.

The game had not been in progress ten minutes when the lawyer suddenly sprang to his feet and accused Meyster of cheating.

Both accuser and accused drew their revolvers, and it looked as though there was going to be a lively time.

"He has the ace of diamonds in his sleeve!" exclaimed Rank. "Mr. Balsam Bob, look, and see if I am right."

The big miner quickly gave Meyster's arm a rap, and, sure enough, the card dropped out.

A howl went up from the crowd and those who were in line of the weapons in the hands of the two men stepped aside.

Meyster made a move to raise his revolver, but before he could do so Rank made a dive under the table, and seizing him by the ankles, jerked him off his feet as quick as a flash.

Then, before the lookers-on were aware of it, he had knocked the revolver from the fallen man's grasp, and placed a pair of handcuffs about his wrists!

"Le Grand Meyster," exclaimed the lawyer, "I arrest you as one of the members of Capt. Steel's masked band!"

As he spoke he threw back the lapel of his coat, and disclosed the badge of a government detective.

A deathly silence followed, during which the miners exchanged glances.

Finally Balsam Bob broke it.

"Ther lawyer is a detective," said he, in a puzzled tone. "Who'd have thought he was that kind of a huckleberry? Gentleman, he's made an arrest, an' we'll stick to him an' see that he gets his prisoner under lock an' key. Any man that is caught cheatin' at cards ought ter be lynched, whether he belongs to ther masked band or not."

A cry of approval went up at this, and almost everybody asked Rank if they could be of any assistance.

"If you will lead to the lockup, so I can place my prisoner in safe quarters, I'll be obliged to you," replied the little lawyer.

"We never had any use for such a thing in these diggings," observed Balsam Bob. "But I guess ther postmaster might let us have a room in ther upper story of his buildin' that would answer. Come on with your prisoner; we'll see about it."

Le Grand Meyster arose to his feet at a command from his captor, and then the entire crowd started for the post office.

They had just reached it, and Ned Rank was about to conduct his prisoner inside, when the clatter of horses' hoofs was heard.

Almost at the same instant Le Grand Meyster gave a shrill whistle, and with a sudden wrench broke away from the crowd.

So sudden did all this happen that the miners stood stock-still in their tracks and gazed in amazement at the approaching horsemen.

There were six of them, and all wore masks over their faces.

"The masked band!" cried Dick. "Open fire on them, men!"

The next instant the riders swooped down upon Le Grand Meyster, and, seizing him, threw him across the neck of one of the horses.

This brought the miners to their senses, and with a yell they charged upon the daring outlaws, firing their weapons as they did so.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DETECTIVE.

Away galloped the six masked outlaws, taking Le Grand Meyster with them.

A volley of revolver shots came after them, but with no effect, as they were too far off.

"Fooled, by jingo!" exclaimed Ned Rank. "It seems that Mr. Meyster held the winning hand, after all. Gentlemen, there is no need of following them; we will have to let it go until some other time. I want to tell you, though, that I did not come out to Skeleton Bar for nothing!"

"That man must certainly belong to the masked band," observed Dick, as he refilled the chambers of his revolver.

"That's sartin, now," said Balsam Bob. "Mr. Rank, I calculate that you have got no end of good sense, an' I'll believe everything you say after this."

"Hooray for Rank!" somebody yelled, and then the entire crowd joined in.

After a while the miners dispersed and went to attend to their work.

Dick went with Balsam Bob to the shanty of the latter, leaving Rank alone with the postmaster.

The two went inside and held a rather lengthy conversation, and finally it was arranged that Rank would stop with Will Duvall during his sojourn at the Bar.

The lawyer—or detective, as we shall now call him—remained pretty close for the balance of the day, and even when night came, and things began to grow lively at the Bar, he failed to show up at any of the saloons.

The fact of it was that he retired very early, and slept sound until about an hour before midnight.

Then he arose and attired himself in a suit of clothes similar to those worn by the miners.

He also made some wonderful changes about his face and general appearance, and when he left the post office building a few minutes later, he looked like anything but a lawyer from Kentucky, or any other place, for that matter.

Rank was now disguised as a man who had seen very rough times. He wore a scraggy beard of a sandy hue, and had a slight hump between his shoulders.

After looking about the vicinity of the post office for a few minutes he slowly started for the outskirts of the mining village.

Once upon the stage-coach road he set up a brisk walk.

"I must pay a visit to the den of the masked band to-night, even if I have to allow myself to be captured in order to do it," he muttered. "I would have brought the boy along to locate the place for me if it were not for the fact that it would be certain death for both of us if we were caught. If I am caught by any of the band and taken before their captain I'll run the risk of losing my life."

The detective kept on walking until he came to a defile that might pass for the one Dick Mount had told him the outlaws' den was located in, and then, in an apparently wearied manner, he entered the narrow place and began feeling along the sides as though in search of something.

For fully ten minutes he kept this thing up, going back and forth several times.

At length the man's quick ear caught the sound of softly approaching footsteps.

The instant he became aware that somebody was coming toward him he sank upon the ground, exclaiming aloud, as he did so:

"It's rough, but I've got to sleep in the open air again to-night. I thought by the looks of this place that I might find a cave to put up in, but I guess it is no go. I wonder how much farther it is to a place where somebody lives?"

"What are you doin' here, stranger?" demanded a rough voice, so near him that Rank gave a start that was quite natural.

"Hello!" he cried, rising to his feet with an effort that seemed really painful; "I'm glad I have met some one. You are the first human being I've come across in the last twenty-four hours."

"Who are you, and where'd you come from?" questioned another voice; and as the disguised man looked up he saw two masked men standing in front of him.

"My name is Burton, and I've come from Sandy Forks, tryin' to get to a place called Skeleton Bar, where a friend of mine has struck it rich," replied Rank. "I've been in the hardest kind of luck for the last month, and I'm tryin' to better my condition."

"Got any money about yer?" asked one of the men.

"Not a red! Do I look as though I was a millionaire?"

"No, you don't, for a fact," and both the outlaws—for they were the outside watchers of the masked band—chuckled as though they thought it a good joke.

"Do you people live around here?" asked Rank, after a pause.

"We don't stop over a hundred miles from here," was the retort of one of the villains. "You kin see by what is on our faces what kind of business we are in."

"I don't care what sort you are, you can't take anything from me, 'cause I ain't got it to take. If I'd had any money I wouldn't have walked all the way from Sandy Forks."

"What are you goin' ter do when yer git ter Skeleton Bar?"

"Run a faro bank, if my friend will back me."

"Is that the way you made yer livin' in Sandy Forks?"

"No, that ain't the way I made my livin' there; it's the way I came near starvin' to death. Why, there ain't enough business there to run a ten-cent-ante game of draw poker."

At this juncture the two outlaws held a whispered conversation, and Rank sat down upon the ground again, to keep up the deception that he had walked a long distance, and was tired out.

At length one of the men addressed him.

"Get up, stranger; we've concluded ter take you to a place where yer kin strike a decent sort of a bed ter sleep on."

"Have you, though?" cried Rank. "If you do I'll never forget you as long as I live!"

"I guess it is safe to run the risk," he heard the other one whisper. "We'll take him through. If ther captain thinks he's no good he kin easily be fixed."

Placing our daring friend between them, the outlaws walked in the direction of the neatly-contrived secret entrance of the den.

When they reached the proper place and gave the signal, they held fast tightly to Rank, who, when he felt the ground giving way beneath his feet, uttered a stifled cry of fear.

"It is all right," chuckled one of them, as they stepped into the passage and allowed the elevator to go up. "Don't get scared, 'cause we live underground."

The detective's heart was beating with expectation, though he felt not the least particle of fear.

"I shall soon be before the dreaded Capt. Steel," he thought. "I must size him up carefully so I will know him when I meet him in disguise."

Contrary to his expectations, when he got into the den he was not taken before the captain.

The lights were turned down very low, and no one save the guard was stirring.

The two men who had conducted him there showed him an empty bunk, and told him he might turn in until morning.

"I am good for a few hours in the headquarters of the masked band," muttered Rank; "so I'll make the best of it."

Thanking the outlaws for their kindness, he crept into the bunk, and apparently dropped to sleep almost immediately.

CHAPTER X.

DICK ON HIS METTLE.

Dick quit work rather early that day, as he intended to pay a visit to the Benham cabin before sunset.

He had fallen in love with Ida, though he was scarcely aware of it as yet. He only knew that he was fond of her society, and that he liked her father and sister very much.

He rigged himself out as neatly as his limited wardrobe would allow, and, with his rifle over his shoulder, set out.

It did not take him long to arrive at the cabin, because he took a short cut up the mountain.

Before he reached the door it was opened by Jane Benham, the elder of the girls, who ran to meet him in an almost frenzied manner.

"Oh Dick!" she exclaimed, "I am so glad you have come! Something awful has happened!"

"Why, what is the matter?" questioned the branded boy, with a pale face.

"Ida has been captured by the masked band, and father has not been home since this morning! I have been afraid to leave the house, and have been worrying myself almost to death. Come in and I will try and tell you all about it."

Rendered speechless by the startling news, Dick followed her into the cabin.

Jane told him in a trembling voice how the six masked men had paid them a visit that morning, and how Ida had been kidnapped.

"And father went away early this morning, saying he would surely return before midday," added Jane.

"Something must be done at once!" ejaculated Dick. "I——"

He did not finish that which he was going to say, for at that instant there was a gentle tap upon the door.

"Who is there?" demanded our hero, drawing his revolver as he spoke.

"It is I, Le Grand Meyster," came the response.

"Open the door. It is an acquaintance of ours," spoke up Jane. "Perhaps he can do something toward assisting us."

Though Dick did not think much of Meyster he took down the bar and swung the door open.

The gambler immediately stepped in and took a seat.

"Mr. Mount, this is Mr. Meyster," said the girl.

"I think we have met before," returned the branded boy, bowing coldly to the gambler.

"Yes you were present when the little unpleasantness occurred at the Horn of Plenty," observed Meyster. "It was a mistake all around, I assure you, and I have strong reasons to believe that the fellow who called himself a lawyer is in league with the masked band. It was a very neat trick of his to make me a prisoner, and then turn me over to the care of the masked men on horseback. Did you hear him whistle, Mr. Mount, when the horsemen appeared on the scene?"

"I thought it was you who did the whistling" retorted Dick, eying the man keenly.

"I? Why, no! How could you be so badly mistaken as that?" And the expression on Meyster's face was so genuine that the boy began to wonder if it was possible for him to be mistaken in his opinion of the man.

"What did the outlaws do with you after they carried you away?" he asked, after a pause.

"They took me to a lonely place on the mountain, and then took all the money I had—which was no small sum, either—together with my watch and chain. After doing this they turned me loose with the handcuffs on my wrists, and being afraid to go back to Skeleton Bar, I have been hiding ever since."

"But where are the handcuffs?" asked Dick.

"I managed to slip them off after a while. See my wrists?"

He held up his hands and disclosed a pair of bruised and swollen wrists to verify his statement.

Dick said no more, but listened in silence while Jane Benham told Le Grand Meyster what had happened.

She had just finished the story of Ida's capture when her father's voice was heard outside the door.

With a cry of joy she sprang to open it, and the next minute Peter Benham was inside.

When he heard what had happened his face turned ashy pale, and he began walking the floor after the manner of a madman.

"Calm yourself, Mr. Benham," interposed Meyster. "I am quite sure I will be able to effect your daughter's rescue. As you may know, I am a rejected suitor to her hand, and if I should succeed in securing her liberty she might think better of me and change the answer she gave me when we last met."

When Dick heard these words he was satisfied that Le Grand Meyster was just what he took him to be at first—a villain.

"He is one of the masked band, as sure as fate," he thought, "and he has put up this job of kidnaping Ida in order to rescue her and then gain her consent to marry him. But he shan't be the one to rescue her—I'll do it myself!"

With this resolve in his mind the branded boy sprang to his feet.

"I'll go and see what can be done toward getting Ida safely back, Mr. Benham," said he, quietly. "I know the way to the den of the masked band, and I promise you I will bring her back or die in trying."

"Ha!" exclaimed Meyster in a sneering manner; "it

seems that I have a rival for the hand of your fair daughter, Mr. Benham. Well, may the best man win."

"This is no time to talk of such things," said the old man, wildly, wringing his hands. "Ida must be brought back, and I care not who is her rescuer. I will go down to the Bar at once and notify Balsam Bob what has happened. You will go with me, Jane!"

Dick waited to hear no more, but promptly left the cabin.

Le Grand Meyster followed a moment later, and then Benham and his daughter started down the mountain side.

Our hero made a bee line for the place where the retreat of the outlaws was located, keeping a sharp watch behind him to see if Meyster was following.

But he saw not a sign of him all the way to the spot where he had placed the button in the crevice.

After finding that it was still there, Dick felt sure he had arrived at the right place, so he cautiously entered the narrow defile.

He had not walked two steps when the figure of a man appeared before him.

It was quite dark by this time, but in spite of this the boy recognized the man as Le Grand Meyster!

"I got here as quickly as you did, you see," observed the villain. "Now, I want to tell you that unless you go back to Skeleton Bar, and mind your own business, one of us will die before we leave this spot!"

"Be it so, then," returned the branded boy, angrily, "for I do not intend to go away from here until I take Ida Benham with me!"

Both had drawn their revolvers, and they stood glaring at each other like a pair of lions.

"If we are going to fight," spoke up Meyster, "we had better step out upon the trail, and have it out with knives. It might be dangerous for us both if we discharged a firearm here."

"Anything to suit you!" exclaimed Dick, who had now about lost his temper.

"Lead the way outside; then. You are only a boy, but it makes no difference, since you are bringing it all upon yourself."

Placing their revolvers back in their belts, the two stepped from the defile and faced each other.

The next moment a pair of hunting knives flashed in the starlight, and the unequal contest began!

CHAPTER XI.

IN THE OUTLAW'S RETREAT.

A duel to the death, with hunting knives for weapons! That is what the branded boy thought as he faced Le Grand Meyster in the starlight.

Though Meyster was a man, and several years Dick's senior, he was not many pounds heavier.

But he certainly had the advantage of the boy in experience, if nothing else.

He was satisfied that he could easily best the lad, and believing him to be a rival for the hand of pretty Ida Benham, he determined to kill him.

Dick did not feel satisfied that he could get the best of Meyster, but he made up his mind that he would, or die in the attempt.

He was quite sure the man was one of the masked band, and it was that lawless crowd he had sworn to hunt down.

Clash! The two knives came together with a ring.

Then the man and boy began swaying backward and forward, each on his guard and looking for an opportunity to lunge with his knife.

A minute passed.

Dick had received a cut on the arm that made a slit in the sleeve of his shirt, but did not draw blood.

Meyster had not been touched at all as yet, and Dick began to realize that he would not be able to do his opponent any harm.

But an instant later something happened which caused the battle to become very much one-sided.

In springing about Meyster stepped upon a round stone, which rolled from under him and threw him heavily to the ground.

"Now I have you!" cried the branded boy, springing upon his prostrate foe with uplifted knife.

Meyster lay perfectly still, and Dick hesitated.

The villain's sudden fall had rendered him unconscious, his head coming in violent contact with the very stone that had rolled from beneath his foot.

The instant Dick comprehended the condition of his prostrate opponent he lowered his knife.

"I can't kill him!" he muttered, half aloud. "Even if I were certain that he was the slayer of my father and brother, I could not, while he is unconscious and unable to help himself!"

The branded boy was just about to rise to his feet when he felt a hand upon his shoulder.

Turning quickly, he beheld a masked man standing over him with a drawn revolver.

But that was not all! Another stood close by, and he, too, had a pistol leveled at the brave boy's breast.

"Don't move an inch, or you are a dead kid!" exclaimed one of the men.

Thinking it the strictly proper thing to do under the circumstances, Dick obeyed.

The man nearest him then quickly seized him, and throwing the boy's hands behind his back, proceeded to bind them together with a thick cord.

As soon as this was accomplished the outlaws turned their attention to Le Grand Meyster.

The villain was just coming to when one of them bent over him, and in an excited voice, he exclaimed:

"Where is the boy I was fighting a duel with?"

"He is here, all safe enough," replied the outlaw. "We've got him a prisoner, an' I guess we'll make you one, too."

Meyster's hands were quickly tied behind him, and then the two masked men lifted him to his feet.

Then, with drawn revolvers, they marched their captives into the narrow defile.

Dick saw that he had not the least show to escape, so he did not make the effort.

He felt certain if he did he would receive a bullet in his brain, so he concluded to trust to luck to get out of the scrape he was in.

In a very short time the four stood upon the wonderful hidden elevator.

The branded boy knew perfectly well what was coming,

so he was not surprised in the least when he felt himself shooting downward.

Once inside the underground place Dick and Meyster were hurried to the main chamber of the retreat.

That the majority of the outlaws were present the boy saw at a glance.

He looked around for Capt. Steel, but could not recognize him among the men.

Leaving their prisoners standing in the center of the apartment, with their arms still bound behind them, the two villains who had captured them turned to the fellow who seemed to be in charge of the place and conversed with him in whispers.

The result was that Dick was immediately marched off to a small dungeon-like apartment, and the door locked securely upon him.

What they did with Le Grand Meyster he could not tell, but judged that he had been placed in a similar apartment.

An hour flitted by. In the dark room, bound as he was, Dick felt anything but comfortable.

He was just wondering if he would have an opportunity of seeing Ida Benham before his fate was decided upon, when a key grated in the lock, and the door swung open.

A man with a lighted lantern in his hand stood before him.

"Come out, young feller," said he; "ther captain wants ter see yer."

Without making a reply, Dick arose to his feet.

He followed the man through a short, narrow passage into the main chamber, and saw that some sort of meeting was in progress.

Capt. Steel stood before a table, and the members of his band were scattered all around him in attitudes of attention.

The eyes of the outlaw captain turned upon Dick as he entered the place, and a deep hush came over the men.

"The branded boy!" observed Capt. Steel, his eyes glittering like those of a snake. "So you dared to come back here again, did you?"

The question was addressed to Dick.

"I was brought here," returned the boy. "I was captured and brought here, the same as before."

"Do you mean to say you did not start for this place when you set out?"

"I did not say so," retorted Dick, not flinching from the penetrating gaze.

There was a silence of half a minute, and then the leader of the masked band cast a sweeping glance at those assembled, and exclaimed:

"Men, this is the second time this boy has been before us. The last time I decided upon what was to be done with him; this time you may."

At these words the heart of the branded boy sank within him. He knew full well that he could expect little mercy from that lawless crowd.

"I move that he an' ther other feller we brought in are made ter finish the fight they started on ther trail!" exclaimed one of the men.

Half a dozen seconded the motion, and it was unanimously carried.

"Very well," observed the captain. "It shall be as you decide. I am sorry I can't remain and see how the duel ends; but you know I have important business elsewhere."

You may bring out the girl and let her witness the combat. The sight of her might spur them on somewhat. Start them at it right away."

Glancing at his watch, the captain hurriedly left the place.

Two minutes later Le Grand Meyster, stripped to the waist, was led into the chamber, and a moment later two men brought Ida Benham out and tied her in a chair.

"Strip!" ordered one of the masked men, addressing Dick, at the same time cutting the rope that bound his wrists.

The boy quickly obeyed.

"Now, then, here are your knives. Get in, an' ther quicker you make mincemeat of each other ther better it will be!"

Le Grand Meyster promptly took the knife handed him and advanced to the center of the room.

Nothing daunted, Dick did the same, though he was satisfied that Meyster knew more about fighting with knives than he did.

His brief bout with him a short time before told him this, and he was pretty sure, if his adversary had not stepped upon a stone, things would have been much different.

Still, he meant to win!

As the pair walked to the center of the room, in plain view of her, Ida Benham uttered a scream.

"Oh, Dick!" she cried, "if you must fight that man, kill him, for I detest him as I do a snake!"

Meyster scowled fiercely at this, and advanced upon Dick with uplifted weapon.

Then the branded boy brought all his skill into play, and the battle began.

CHAPTER XII.

"YOU CAN NEVER LEAVE THIS PLACE ALIVE!"

As Dick Mount braced himself to receive the onslaught of his foe, it suddenly occurred to him to ask the outlaws what would be the fate of the winner after the contest was over.

"Wait!" he cried, jumping nimbly out of Meyster's way, "I want to ask a question before I fight."

"What is it?" said Meyster, coming to a stand before him.

"I want to know what will become of the winner. I don't propose to assist in giving an exhibition to these men, and then be killed by them whether I win or not."

"That is right," spoke up Meyster, turning to the assembled outlaws. "What say you, men? Shall the winner be allowed to depart in peace and conduct the young lady safely home?"

"Yes, yes!" chorused the men.

"You talk more like the leader of these men than a prisoner among them," observed Dick. "But it makes no difference who you are—I am satisfied to fight you on the terms you just named."

"I, too, am satisfied with that proposition!" exclaimed Ida Benham. "Dick Mount, you must win the fight! Kill that man as one of the slayers of your father and brother, for I am sure he is in league with these men!"

These words nerved the branded boy to do something desperate, and with his teeth clinched in a determined

manner, he faced his opponent, whose face was now livid with rage.

Clash! clash! The steel blades came together with a ring that sounded loud and clear in the underground place.

Dick seemed to have become possessed with the strength of a demon, for he was on the aggressive from the start, and forced his antagonist about the room with apparent ease.

Almost spellbound, the outlaws gazed upon the scene. The skill the boy displayed was something remarkable to them.

"Keep it up, Dick!" shouted the captive girl. "Though he is a man, he is but a toy in your hands."

It seemed to Dick that he was urged on by some invisible force, and the manner in which he wielded the knife was astonishing to himself.

He knew that in his present condition he was more than a match for Meyster, though why it was he could not imagine.

Several times he had an opportunity to split the man's heart in twain, but he contented himself with merely pricking his skin, and when two minutes had passed the blood was gushing from Meyster's body in several tiny streams.

But Le Grand Meyster was as courageous as a lion, and showed that he meant to die game.

Not a sound could be heard save the heavy breathing of the contestants. Several of the men looked as though they felt like interfering, but the majority of them stood as though they had become rooted to the floor of the cavern.

For five minutes the fight waged, and then by a lightning-like movement Dick severed Meyster's thumb from his hand, causing him to drop his knife to the ground.

At this a yell of dismay went up from the outlaws, and, rushing forward, half a dozen seized the disarmed man and bore him from the spot.

"Hold!" exclaimed the branded boy; "if that man is not a member of your band, why do you wish to save his life?"

As there was no answer to his question, Dick walked over to Ida Benham, and severed the cords that bound her to the chair.

"According to the agreement, we will be allowed to depart," said he.

"You will be allowed to depart to ther other country," said a rough voice, and, turning, the brave boy beheld half a dozen revolvers leveled at him.

The manner in which he was treated upon his first visit to the outlaws' den had led him to believe that the villains meant to keep their word, and allow the winner of the fight to depart as the escort of Ida Benham.

"Is this the way you keep your word?" he asked, with flashing eyes.

"Can't help it, young feller," returned one of the men. "We'll have to hold you till ther captain comes. Put on your clothes now, an' let us lock you up."

As he ceased speaking a couple of his companions seized Ida and led her back to the place she had been confined in.

Dick saw it would be extreme foolhardiness for him to make any resistance, so he reluctantly donned his clothing and allowed the outlaws to place him back in the dark, cell-like apartment.

One thing about his prison was that it was perfectly

dry, and as there was a pile of straw in one of the corners, he threw himself upon it in a dejected manner.

The exciting events he had passed through since he set out to pay a visit to the Benham cabin that evening were enough to set his brain in a whirl, and after vainly endeavoring to arrive at some conclusion, he dropped into a doze.

Why it was that he slept so sound Dick could not tell, but, anyhow, it was some hours later when he awoke. "Great Scott!" he gasped; "it must be morning."

He felt rested, but very hungry, and, rising to his feet, he began pacing the narrow confines of the apartment.

For nearly half an hour he kept this up, and then he was relieved by hearing footsteps in the passage outside.

A moment later the door opened, and a man with a lantern appeared in the doorway.

"Come out, young feller," said he. "Ther captain wants ter see yer."

Glad enough to get out of his pent-up quarters, Dick followed him outside.

As he emerged from the passage into the main apartment the boy was astonished to see that it was lighted by the sun, which streamed through a long, narrow crevice on the east side.

Some of the outlaws were eating at a rough table, and two or three were peering out through the crack through which the light came.

The branded boy looked over the assemblage, but could see nothing of the captain.

"Come here, boy, an' take a look out of our window," said one of the men.

Out of curiosity, more than anything else, Dick obeyed.

As he peered through the crack in the rocky wall of the cavern he gave a cry of astonishment.

The crack was in the face of a cliff, and far below he could see the little mining town of Skeleton Bar!

The sun was about an hour high, and the collection of rough shanties looked like so many palaces to Dick just then.

"What would you give ter be down there?" asked the man who had spoken, grinning like a monkey as he put the question.

"I am satisfied to be where I am," replied Dick. "If the captain's word is good for anything, I will soon be down there."

A silence followed the boy's words, which was suddenly broken by the voice of Capt. Steel.

"Attention!"

The branded boy turned with the rest, and beheld the outlaw captain standing before his table.

"Bring the boy here!"

As the villain spoke, he turned his gaze upon Dick, who noticed that the part of his face not hidden by the mask was very pale.

Without waiting to be led, Dick walked boldly to the captain.

"I suppose I am at liberty to go now, and take the young lady with me?" observed he.

"You can never leave this place alive!" was the stern rejoinder.

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK IS HANGED.

As these words left the lips of Capt. Steel, a deep hush came over the assembled crowd.

Dick turned pale, but otherwise did not show any signs of fear.

The masked captain was enveloped in a huge cloak, and he looked as though he had just recovered from a fit of sickness.

He appeared to be very irritable, too, which was not his usual manner.

"Where is Burton, the man who desires to join our band?" he asked, sinking upon a chair as he spoke.

"Here I am, captain!" exclaimed a voice, and the next instant the disguised detective stepped forward.

As he had not been admitted to the secret quarters of the band until after the duel between Dick and Le Grand Meyster, he, of course, knew nothing of it.

He had just crept out of the bunk the outlaws gave him when the branded boy was brought upon the scene.

Though very much surprised at seeing Dick a prisoner there, he did not show any more interest in the boy than any of the band.

He had asked the men to let him join their band, and they agreed that, with the captain's permission, he should.

When Rank heard Capt. Steel tell Dick that he should never leave the place alive, he felt a trifle uneasy.

If they resolved to kill their prisoner, how was he to prevent it?

When he was called by the masked leader he grew more uneasy.

It struck him that Capt. Steel would command him to slay Dick.

And he was right, too, for a minute later the captain said:

"Burton, you want to become a member of the masked band of Skeleton Bar?"

"I do," was the quick reply.

"Are you willing to prove yourself worthy of becoming a member?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then take this boy and kill him!"

"How will I do it, sir?" gasped the detective.

"Any way you like. The more original the method, the better I will like it."

The detective's disguise was so perfect that Dick did not know him, and when he heard that his life was to be sacrificed to prove the fitness of a man to join the murderous gang, his heart sank within him.

"After you finish him you can toss his body out through the crack over there. It will fall into the deep canyon below, and no one will ever know what has become of the branded boy!" went on the masked villain.

"I've got an idea, captain."

It was Rank who spoke.

"What is it?"

"Suppose I put a noose around his neck, throw out enough slack rope to reach pretty near to the bottom of the canyon, and then chuck the boy out? When he fetches up at the end of the rope his head is pretty sure to fly off."

"That is an original idea. Go ahead and carry it out."

As though he was much pleased with what he intended

to do, Rank proceeded to bind Dick's hands behind his back.

"Now, where's your long rope?" he asked.

"There is plenty in the storeroom over there. Take the boy in there with you and get him ready for his journey. When everything is in readiness bring him out and give him the drop to death."

With a genuine smile of satisfaction, the detective led his victim to the storeroom.

Ten minutes later he came out, dragging the helpless boy with a rope that was noosed about his neck.

"I am all ready!" cried the supposed Burton. "If some one will give me a lift, now, I'll soon finish the job. I think no more of killing a man than I do of playing a game of draw poker."

"You are a good one, I guess," returned Capt. Steel. "Go ahead and do your job as it suits you, and pick out what help you want."

The detective darted across the apartment, and the branded boy, to save himself from being choked, was forced to follow him.

"Hold on!" cried Dick, as a couple of men seized him to lift him to the level of the opening; "if I must die, shoot me! Don't let me die with a noose about my neck!"

Rank chuckled gleefully.

"That is just what I will do—come to think of it. If I drop you down, so that your head will be yanked off, you'll die too sudden. Guess I'll lower you down and let you strangle to death, and by and by one of us can cut the rope and let you drop below in your last resting place."

Capt. Steel nodded approvingly to this amendment to the original plan, so without any further preliminaries Dick was lifted up and deposited upon the top of the narrow wall which the crack divided.

The boy's struggles were in vain. His hands were tied, and he was as helpless as an infant.

With a gleeful chuckle that sounded fiendish, even to the hard-hearted outlaws, Rank gave the boy a push and caused him to roll through the opening.

Then he began lowering upon the rope, singing a boat-song as he did so.

Foot after foot of the rope went out, until finally there was not over ten feet of it left.

"Hold on!" exclaimed one of the men, "you are pretty near the bottom. That rope will just reach. Hold him where he is until he dies!"

"Good enough!" nodded the detective. "Why didn't you say so before? I wouldn't have lowered him so far."

"He'll die there as quick as he would if he was closer up here," observed Capt. Steel. "Make the rope fast, Burton, and give him a chance to stretch out his full length."

Rank obeyed, and then, calmly seating himself on a bench, asked one of the men for a chew of tobacco.

Not one of the lawless band clambered to the opening and looked down to view the boy in his death struggles. They did not mind shooting people down when they made a raid on a stage-coach, but to see a fellow-being dying with a noose about his neck was not to their fancy.

Perhaps the thoughts of such a thing reminded them of what their fate would be if they got their just deserts.

Capt. Steel waited until ten minutes had passed, and then exclaimed:

"Let the rope go!"

Rank obeyed the command instantly, and like a flash the end disappeared through the crack in the face of the cliff.

A sigh of relief went up from the outlaws.

"That is the end of one of our worst enemies," observed the captain. "He was so persistent that he caused me to order him to be put to death, when I would rather he would go back to the home he came from and live."

"He was equal to any man I ever saw in handling a knife," spoke up one of the outlaws.

The leader of the masked band smiled grimly.

"He will never handle a knife again," said he.

"Am I to consider myself a member of the band?" asked the detective, after a pause.

"You are, as soon as you take the oath," was the rejoinder. "Step up, and I will administer it to you now."

Rank did so, and a few minutes later he was pronounced a full-fledged member of the masked band.

One of the men conducted him about the underground retreat and showed him the means of ingress and egress.

Besides the remarkably constructed elevator there was a long passage at the other end of the cavernous place, which led to the stable where the outlaws kept their horses.

This opened at the extreme end of the defile, and was the way Dick was taken from the place after being branded.

As a perfect hiding place for the lawless band the cavern could not be beat!

CHAPTER XIV.

CAPT. STEEL IS SURPRISED.

A short time after Dick Mount had been hanged, Capt. Steel retired to his private room.

He seemed to be suffering great pain, and with an oath he threw off his cloak and showed that his right arm was in a sling.

The hand was bandaged heavily, and it was that from which came the pain.

The villain's room was not furnished very handsomely, but it was quite comfortable.

Dropping wearily upon a chair that was covered with the softest of skins, he seized a bell cord, and gave a pull upon it.

A minute later there came a gentle knock upon the door.

"Come in!" said the captain.

With noiseless tread an old Indian brave entered.

"My hand pains me, Nekos," said he.

"Me fix," was the quick rejoinder.

With the skill of a practiced surgeon the Indian removed the bandages.

Had Dick Mount been there at that moment he would have been surprised.

The hand of Capt. Steel was thumbless!

Le Grand Meyster and the leader of the masked band were one and the same person!

This was fully proven a moment later when the man removed his mask.

He was a ventriloquist, and thus had the power of changing his voice.

The Indian had dressed the wound immediately after Dick had cut the thumb off and had stopped the flow of blood by searing the veins with a red-hot iron.

Then he applied an ointment that was soothing, and gave his patient a mixture to make him sleep.

But in spite of this the outlaw captain had awakened rather early, and his hand had pained him ever since.

Now he wanted the pain allayed.

The Indian produced a horn vial, which was filled with a curious dark paste, and taking some out on his finger, he lightly smeared it over the wound.

So deftly did he work that the outlaw could not feel his touch.

Again and again did he apply the paste, until at length he had several layers of the stuff on.

Capt. Steel began to feel easier.

"It don't hurt so much now, Nekos," said he.

"No hurt no more; keep bandage on, and in six days be all right," was the reply.

When his physician had retired Capt. Steel called in Burton, the new member.

"I want you to take a walk with me this afternoon," said he.

"I'll be glad to do so, captain," returned the detective.

"I am going to show you the biggest pile of gold you ever saw in one heap."

"Yes, sir."

"It belongs to a man who has been working the place for years in secret. He thinks no one knows where the treasure spot is, but I discovered it some time ago by following him when he went to work."

"There must be enough there to make us all rich," ventured the disguised Rank.

"There is—if we can get hold of it."

"Why, does he keep it guarded?"

"Yes; but not by men. He has a number of hidden traps about the place, and it is dangerous to go there."

"It seems to me these traps could be located and destroyed."

"I think they can; that is the reason I asked you to take a walk with me. I'll show you the place, and then give you a week to find a way to get the gold."

"I'll do it, if anybody can?" exclaimed Rank.

"We will start out at three this afternoon; it is not over twenty minutes' walk from here."

"What sort of a man is it that owns this secret mine?"

"He is a cranky sort of a fellow, aged about fifty-five. His name is Peter Benham. I have one of his daughters a prisoner here now. She is my promised wife, too."

Though the detective knew the latter assertion was a lie, he encouraged the captain to go on.

"I think I'll keep the girl here till my hand gets well, and then we'll hunt up a clergyman somewhere and have a wedding."

"That will be fun!" observed the detective. "But you spoke about your hand—what is the matter with it, if I may ask?"

"Haven't the men told you about the fight I had with the boy you killed?"

"Not a word."

"Well, I fought him last night with knives, though he did not know it was me, for I was disguised with a false

beard and changed my voice. He got the best of me, which is saying a great deal, if I do make the statement myself, and cut off my thumb and disarmed me at the same time. If it had not been for my men he would certainly have made an end of me then and there."

Rank knew all about the fight, as Dick had told him of it before he lowered him from the opening, and as he had surmised that Meyster and the outlaw captain were one and the same he was not much surprised.

The outlaw talked to him a minute or two longer, and then, telling him to surely be ready to go out at three o'clock, dismissed him.

Having done this Capt. Steel removed his mask and donned his false beard, which transformed him into the character of Le Grand Meyster.

"Now for a visit to the pretty one," he muttered.

Leaving his room, he walked through the main chamber of the retreat until he came to a stout door near the rear end of it.

Producing a key from his pocket with his left hand, he unlocked the door and stepped inside.

Ida Benham, pale but fearless, arose to meet him.

"Good-morning, my fair one!" exclaimed the villain.

"Leave me at once!" cried the girl, with flashing eyes.

"Not until I have told you something," was the reply.

"I want to inform you that I am one of the masked band, and since you refuse to marry me, I now tell you that I shall force you to. One week from to-day you will become my bride! Your boy lover is dead at the bottom of the canyon, and unless you tame down a trifle your father and sister will follow him. If you are a sensible girl you will agree to marry me; then I will give up this sort of life and take you to California, where we can live in happiness the rest of our days. What say you, Ida?"

As the man asked the question his voice softened and there was a genuine love-gleam in his eyes.

"What do I say?" cried the girl, frantically. "Never! that is what I say. I will take my own life before I become your wife!"

"We shall see," was the sneering rejoinder. "Remember what I have said; that is all. I have the power to carry it out, and I will, too. I will call upon you every day until the week is up, and then, if you still refuse, I will make you my wife anyhow, and your father and sister shall die! Adieu until to-morrow!"

With a bow of mock courtesy Capt. Steel left the room, closing and locking the door after him.

Rank saw no more of him until three-o'clock, when he got ready to go out with him.

In the character of Le Grand Meyster, the outlaw led the way out of the retreat by way of the stable, and then the two set out in a northerly direction.

Over a rough, stony mountain path they made their way, and at length came to a miniature valley that was almost hidden from sight between two cliffs.

"Down there is the spot where Peter Benham's gold is hidden," exclaimed the outlaw captain. "Right by that stream of water—Great snakes! Look there!"

The villain's face was the color of a sheet as he pointed below them.

And no wonder! Just in the act of removing his shirt, preparatory to taking a plunge in the cooling waters of Elkhorn Creek, was a boy.

But that was not all! Upon his back, in a deep red hue, were the letters "U. S.!"

"The branded boy, or his ghost!" cried Capt. Steel, shaking as though he had suddenly been taken with a fit of ague.

"Do you see it," he cried, to the detective.

"I can't see anyone," said the detective, pretending not to see Dick.

"Come," said the outlaw, who seemed to have completely lost his nerve, "let's get back to headquarters."

They retraced their steps, and soon reached the cave.

CHAPTER XV.

WHAT HAPPENED TO DICK.

Dick Mount thought sure his last hour had arrived when he was led into the storeroom of the outlaws' headquarters.

But the moment he was inside Rank whispered something in his ear which made him start with joy.

"I am the little lawyer from Kentucky!" was all the detective said, but that was enough to make the branded boy think he had a chance to live a little while longer.

"How is it that you are here among these villains?" asked Dick in a whisper.

"I arrived in this vicinity late last night, and was kindly taken in by a couple of outlaws," was the reply. "I have asked permission to become a member, and you heard what followed. Now, I have conceived a scheme to save your life, if you will do exactly as I say."

"Surely I will!" exclaimed Dick.

"Well, I am going to put a noose about your neck and attach another piece of rope to it that will fasten under your arms beneath your clothes, so when you are lowered into the chasm the strain will not come upon your neck at all, though the outlaws will think it will."

"Get me ready at once, then," said the branded boy, with a hopeful look in his eyes.

Rank now proceeded to business. With deft fingers he attached the rope about the boy's body, after he had removed his shirt, and then the noose was put about his neck.

"I will tie your arms so that the least twist you make will loosen them," observed the detective.

After Dick had buttoned his shirt to conceal the rope about his body, he placed his hands behind him, and Rank did as he said.

"Now, then, we are ready; act obstinate and frightened, and all will go well."

Dick nodded, and the two went outside.

What took place in the main chamber the reader already knows.

The detective made no mistake when he adjusted the noose so it would not harm the boy.

When Dick felt himself being lowered, he withdrew his hands from the loosened cords and steadied himself during the descent.

When his downward motion ceased he saw that he was but ten or twelve feet from the ground, and, as he knew exactly what Rank intended to do, he waited for the drop to take place.

The minutes that followed seemed like hours to him,

and he was just thinking of severing the rope with the knife the detective had provided him with, when he felt it give way from above.

Down he went like a shot, landing squarely upon his feet, without hurting himself a particle beyond a slight jar.

"Now to get out of here!" he exclaimed, as soon as he gathered himself up. "If it had not been for Rank's opportune arrival at the headquarters of the masked band I would surely have been killed by the villains. That man is one of the shrewdest I ever came in contact with. I wonder in whose interest he came here? He said something about being in the employ of the government one time, and probably that is the case."

Coiling the rope the outlaws supposed he had been hanged with, he swung it over his shoulder and started to find a way to get out of the place.

The chasm was what is known as a "blind" one—that is, it was a wide crack in the earth which came together in the form of a V at each end, and with no means to climb out of it.

But with the aid of the rope Dick hoped to ascend, and he soon found this quite possible.

About twenty feet above him, and twenty yards from the spot where he had been lowered down, was a sharp, projecting crag.

From this up was a steep ascent, which could be climbed, Dick thought.

"I must throw the rope over that crag," he muttered. "Then I'll soon be all right."

Suiting the action to the words, he threw the coil of rope into the air.

The first attempt was a failure, but the next was a success.

The rope went over the crag, and the other end came down at his feet.

He now had both ends, and as the distance was not very great, it was not a difficult feat for an athletic young man, like himself, to clamber hand over hand to the crag.

In five minutes from the time he sighted it Dick was standing upon the crag.

Thinking the rope might be of more service to him, he carefully coiled it up, and then started up the difficult ascent.

Spurred on by his remarkable deliverance from death, the branded boy made his way upward, and finally, in an almost exhausted state, he reached the level above.

From this point he had about the same view as he had from the outlaws' den through the crack in the face of the cliff, and he could plainly see the entire section that composed Skeleton Bar.

"I won't go down there yet," he muttered, after he had indulged in a short rest. "I will look about this mountain a little while. Who knows but I may learn something that will be a benefit to me?"

Rank had not only supplied him with a knife, but a revolver, too, and, being thus armed, the boy had nothing to fear.

The part of the mountain Dick now stood upon was not many yards from the headquarters of the masked band; yet the exact spot, or even the defile, could not be seen by him.

There was a sound of footsteps on the rocky ledge. Dick turned.

Before him stood Peter Benham.

"What are you doing here, Dick? Have you seen my daughter? Do you know what those blasted robbers have done with her?"—old Benham was excited and pale.

"We will soon find her, and get her back again," said Dick, with a very determined look.

"Come with me, Dick," said Benham.

Dick followed the old man down a steep descent to a perpendicular wall of rock that was covered with a luxuriant growth of vines.

The old man made a careful survey above, and then, being satisfied that no human being was looking at them, he swung a pile of loosened vines aside and ushered the boy into a dry, roomy cave.

"Here is where I spend the most of my time when I am away from home," he whispered, almost hoarsely. "This is my treasure trove, Dick Mount. Swear that you will never say anything about it while I live, unless you have permission from me to do so."

"Why——" gasped Dick, in astonishment.

"It matters not," interrupted Benham. "Promise to do as I ask."

"I will never reveal a word about this place without your permission," said Dick.

"Very well," said the old man. "Though I never told you before, Dick, Jane and Ida are the daughters of a millionaire!"

"Watch, and I will prove that what I say is true."

Stepping to the back of the cave, he pried a slab of stone aside with a crowbar, and told the boy to look.

"He did so in mute astonishment."

A cavity about four feet square was almost filled with gold dust and nuggets!

I have traps set all around near the entrance of this cave, so it would be impossible for anyone but myself to gain admission to this place. The most of my traps are the kind that bears are caught with.

After Dick had looked around long enough to become familiar with the surroundings, he and Peter Benham ascended to the place at the top of the cliff where they had met each other a short time before.

"We are now very close to the headquarters of the masked band," whispered the branded boy; "in fact, we may even be standing directly over it."

"I guess I'll take a peep down in the chasm," said Benham, dropping upon his stomach and crawling to the verge of the dangerous descent.

Leaning over as far as he dared, he peered down at the jagged face of the cliff.

For a moment he looked in silence, and then suddenly a cry that was half amazement, half joy, left his lips.

He appeared so much excited over something that, had not Dick seized him by the ankles, he would certainly have fallen over the cliff.

"Ida is below us; not over twenty feet!" gasped Benham, his face as white as a sheet, and his body trembling with excitement.

"What!" cried Dick. "Do you mean to say you saw her?"

"I did. Look and see for yourself."

Thinking that the man was becoming crazed over his troubles, the boy cautioned him to keep a safe distance from the edge of the chasm.

"Don't you move an inch from where you stand, and I will take a look," said he.

"Hurry, for God's sake!" exclaimed the old man. "Talk to her, for I have not the nerve."

Dick quickly leaned over, and one glance showed him that what Benham said was true.

Through a jagged crack in the face of the cliff he saw the head and shoulders of a young girl, and that it was really Ida Benham he had not the least doubt.

She seemed to be contemplating as to whether she had not better throw herself down upon the rocks and crags so many feet below, and thus escape from her captivity.

Even as the branded boy gazed at her in mute astonishment the girl crept through the opening and poised herself to make a leap!

CHAPTER XVI.

TWO BLOWING-UP PLOTS.

Capt. Steel was very much elated to get back to headquarters again.

The only thing he worried over was the apparition of the branded boy he had seen.

He believed Dick Mount to be dead as much as he believed anything, and when he saw the bared back which he himself had branded with a red-hot iron, he could but believe in ghosts.

Now, if the ghost would only leave him alone, the only person he had to fear, to any great extent, was the detective.

When the old Indian doctor dressed his wounded hand and pronounced it much improved, in spite of the hours of excitement he had passed through, the outlaw captain felt better.

He ordered his men to remain outside during the balance of the night, and to either capture or shoot down any person who came that way.

Then he sought his couch and did not leave it until after nine the next morning.

When he came out into the main apartment of the retreat, he learned from the guards that his men were still on duty outside in the vicinity of their hidden retreat.

"The miners at the Bar are forcing it upon us since they have got that detective with them," he muttered. "Well, they got more than they wanted last night, and as it is quite likely we will soon be forced to leave here, it will be the proper thing to give them another good shaking up while the iron is hot."

Writing a list of ten names of the members of the band, he dispatched one of the guards to hunt them up and have them report to him.

The outlaws he had selected were the more intelligent of the members, and the captain desired to consult with them.

Half an hour later the ten outlaws and their leader were gathered together.

"Men," said Capt. Steel, "in a very few days we will be compelled to leave this snug retreat. It is getting altogether too hot for us around here, and we will have to look for a new field and fresh pastures. Before we go we ought to give the people of Skeleton Bar a good shaking up. I have called you together to consult what is to be done. Suggestions as to the best way to give

the miners a lesson that they will not forget very soon are in order."

"Let's ride through the place in a body an' shoot all we come across," spoke up one man.

The captain shook his head.

"That will not do," said he. "We are running too much risk ourselves."

"Couldn't we sneak down in ther night an' set fire to ther most of ther shanties?" suggested another.

"A good plan, but that would hardly suffice to kill anybody, unless they were fools enough to stay in the shanties and be burned. Can none of you think of something better than that?"

"Tell you what you might do," said the oldest member of the band.

"What?" chorused the outlaws.

"How many barrels of powder have we got on hand?"

"Three whole ones," answered the captain, in an interested manner.

"What's the matter with puttin' fuses ter 'em an' sendin' 'em down ther mountain right plumb inter ther midst of ther shanties?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Capt. Steel; "the very thing! We'll do it to-day. Four of you go out and find a suitable place where they can be started from, and the rest of us will see that the barrels are got there. If we don't blow the biggest part of Skeleton Bar into flinders my name isn't Capt. Steel!"

A more fiendish plot could hardly have been conceived, and the outlaws were jubilant at the thoughts of it.

They at once started to get ready.

One at a time the barrels of powder were conveyed to a spot that overlooked the little mining village.

Directly at the foot of the nearby perpendicular ascent were the shanties that made up Skeleton Bar.

True, it was fully eight or nine hundred yards distant, but any round object would roll into the middle of the village as easily as could be, and very quickly, too.

The masked band were satisfied on this point, but they did not know just how to regulate the fuses that would set the powder off.

If it was discharged too quickly no damage would be done at all; and if it did not go off the instant the barrels rolled among the shanties the miners would have time to get out of the way.

But after a great deal of figuring Capt. Steel concluded that he had solved the problem, and he resolved to arrange the fuses himself.

"We'll send the barrels down at noon, when our enemies will be gathered around the Horn of Plenty saloon," observed he, with a wicked glitter in his eyes.

When noon arrived everything was in readiness to carry out the scheme.

A heavy growth of stunted pines fringed the mountain at that point, and anyone below could not possibly see what was going on above them.

Fieldglass in hand, Capt. Steel watched the miners come and go to the saloon.

Soon a vast crowd gathered in a wide open spot, about halfway between the post office and the saloon.

The miners were holding a meeting to decide upon what

course to pursue in cleaning out the masked band; and all unconscious of the danger that was lurking, they had chosen a spot where the powder barrels could roll in less than two minutes from the time the outlaws started them.

It was almost like letting them drop upon them.

Will Duvall was standing upon an empty whisky barrel, addressing the crowd.

"Gentlemen," said he, "Mr. Ned Rank, the government officer, advises us to ride up to the defile in a body, and while we protect them from any attack from the masked band, he and Balsam Bob will place a number of dynamite cartridges directly over the underground den, or as near as they can locate it. Then they will light the fuses, and we will draw back and wait until the roof of the den is blown off. If there are any of the outlaws left alive after the explosion we can easily settle their hash for them. What do you think of Mr. Rank's proposition?"

"Bully!"

"Good!"

"Fust-rate!"

These and many like expressions came from the excited crowd.

Rank now got upon the temporary speaker's stand.

"Gentlemen," observed he; "this seems like murder, and it is, for that matter. But it is the only way to get rid of the pests that are murdering innocent people and robbing the mails, thus putting a set-back upon the growth of our lively little town. War has been declared between us, and we have a right to use the latest appliances of modern warfare."

"Hooray for ther detective!" yelled Balsam Bob, and it is needless to say that the cheers were given with a will.

"We will get ready an' go up at once!" said the big miner, who was very anxious to settle accounts with the masked band, for he believed they had made way with Dick Mount.

Ten minutes later, fifty horsemen were gathered in a bunch on the spot, and nearly every honest man in the village was clustered about to see them off.

Balsam Bob carried the dynamite cartridges, for he knew how to handle them well, as he had blown more than one piece of rock into smithereens by the powerful explosive.

Just as the detective was about to give the word to start, they heard four shots from above them.

Of course the miners naturally glanced in that direction.

"Look out!" yelled Balsam Bob. "Somethin' is goin' ter drop on us!"

And something was going to drop.

Coming down the steep descent were the three powder barrels, one after the other!

And they were coming with the velocity of cannon balls, too!

Before the miners could scatter and get away, the barrels struck the short slope at the foot of the mountain, and came rolling right into their midst!

CHAPTER XVII.

A GIRL'S WONDERFUL ESCAPE.

"Don't stir, Ida!"

The branded boy almost shouted the words as he saw the fair girl preparing to leap to a certain death.

Fortunately she had time to check herself, and almost instantly she seized a projecting piece of rock and steadied herself into an upright position.

"Thank Heaven!" cried Dick, in a tone of delirious joy. "Stay right where you are, Ida. Your father and I have come here to save you!"

"I will do just as you say," returned the girl, fixing her eyes upon those of the one she loved, and, until that moment, believed lying dead and mangled at the foot of the cliff.

Dick quickly drew back, and then uncoiled the rope, which he still had in his possession as a souvenir of his remarkable escape, and making a loop in one end of it, leaned over and lowered it to the fair one below.

"Stand where you are!" said he to Peter Benham; "and when I give the word, pull on the rope."

"All right," replied the man, hoarsely, and then, with staring eyes, he waited to see his daughter standing safely before him.

As the reader knows, Ida Benham possessed more courage and determination than the average girl, and the moment the loop reached her she placed it beneath her arms and waited for Dick to give the word for her to swing herself off.

He gave it a moment later, and she unhesitatingly let go her hold upon the rock.

Up she went under the combined efforts of the branded boy and her father.

Two minutes later she was on the solid ground above, clasped in her father's arms.

The moment she was released by him she turned her attention to Dick, who, for the first time in his life, opened his arms to receive her.

The lips of the two young people met, and her father looked on with tears of joy in his eyes.

"I am satisfied," said he. "Come! let us get away from here before your escape is discovered."

"It is a wonder to me that you were not heard by some of the outlaws when you called to me," observed the girl, as they hurried from the dangerous spot.

"I could not help it," returned our hero. "I thought you were about to jump to your death."

"And I believe I was. I must have been out of my mind at that moment. Capt. Steel swore he was going to force me to become his wife, and that thought completely upset me. Then I thought of the gallant young man who so bravely fought for me; a vision of his mangled body lying at the foot of the cliff came to my eyes, and when I crawled through the hole in the wall of my prison I knew not what I was doing."

"How came you to get out of there?" asked her father.

"I was rendered desperate at the thought of being confined in that place, and began looking for a way to get out less than half an hour ago. Some boards that were fastened against the side of the wall attracted my attention, and I pulled one of them off, with no little exertion, I can tell you. When I saw the light of day I was seized with a queer spell, and remembered nothing that followed until

I heard the voice of him I thought to be dead. Strange to say, I was as cool at that moment as at any time in my life."

"Not one girl in a thousand would have been saved!" exclaimed Dick.

"I am very thankful," added Benham.

The old man led the way, by a short cut, to his lonely cabin on the side of the mountain, without meeting a human being.

"I have a few articles I wish to take down to the Bar with us, and then I will give up this cabin forever."

As they entered the little abode, Dick got a sudden idea in his head.

"See here," said he, "the outlaws think I am dead, and they will most likely think their girl prisoner met the same fate, when they find the opening in the side of the room she was confined in. They cannot see the bottom of the chasm from their retreat, and it is not likely they will go down to look for the bodies. Mr. Benham, what do you say if Ida and I disguise ourselves?"

"A good idea!" exclaimed Benham. "If you remain a few days in disguise, the outlaw band may be broken up, and there will be no danger of your being bothered by them."

"I am willing, but how shall I disguise myself so Le Grand Meyster will not know me?" asked Ida.

"You will have to pass as a man," returned Dick. "My clothes will not be much too large for you, and I will put on an old rig of your father's, if he has one lying about."

"I have enough clothes to fit you out," spoke up Benham. "Go ahead and make the change at once."

Ida did not like the idea of donning male apparel, but her father and Dick soon coaxed her to do it.

The boy followed the old man into the back room, and a few minutes later came out attired in a red shirt, pants that were pretty well worn out, a pair of heavy boots and a broad-brimmed felt hat.

Ida then blushing took his clothing and went up to the loft she and her sister had so long occupied, and made the change.

When she came down her father would not have recognized her had he not known she was going to make the transformation. She had her luxuriant hair tied in a knot on the top of her head and covered by Dick's jaunty hat; and with the aid of some grease and dust she transformed her fair face into one that resembled that of a boy who was too reckless and lazy to use soap and water more than once a week.

"You will do!" exclaimed Dick, admiringly. "I guess I'll try a little of the grease and dust on my face. If it disguises me as much as it does you no one will ever know me, unless they examine my back and find the letters U. S. branded there."

Ida laughingly offered to make up his face for him, and he allowed her to do so.

When she was through with him they looked, for all the world, like a pair of young tenderfeet, who had been more or less unfortunate in their travels.

Benham now gathered the articles he wished to take with him, and then the three made their way down the mountain.

Old man Benham started in a direct line for the little mining village, and the disguised boy and girl kept close behind him.

Ida got along much faster in her male attire than she would otherwise have done, and, although the rig appeared awkward to her she said nothing about it.

It was just about two minutes before the commencement of the noon hour when our three friends came upon a sight that startled them not a little.

They beheld over a score of masked men clustered in a bunch on the mountain side, apparently very much interested in something that was transpiring in their midst.

Dick and his companions were about a hundred yards below the men when they saw them, and the boy comprehended that the villains were up to something.

Almost the instant they saw the outlaws they came to a halt and sunk to the ground behind a clump of bushes.

Much puzzled as to what business the scoundrels were engaged in, they watched them intently.

A moment later the group spread out, and the branded boy and his companions saw three barrels standing where they had been.

But that was not all! They saw Capt. Steel, whom they all knew on account of his having his right arm in a sling, calmly fitting fuses into the bungholes of the barrels.

Instantly it flashed upon Dick what the outlaws intended doing.

Without a word to either Ida or her father, he crept noiselessly to the edge of the ledge they were hiding upon and looked below.

From his point of view he could see the gathering of miners in the square below, as well as the outlaws.

"They have three barrels of powder, and they are going to touch them off and send them rolling down upon the miners!" he exclaimed, under his breath.

Pale as a sheet he hurried to the side of his companions.

In a moment he had whispered the intentions of the outlaws to them.

"We must warn those below of their danger!" said Ida.

"How are we going to do it?" asked her father, excitedly. "If we——"

He stopped suddenly, for at that moment Capt. Steel touched his lighted cigar to the fuses on the powder barrels.

Then he raised his hand and three of his men gave the barrels a start, and they went whirling down the descent!

Dick saw that they would pass within ten yards of where he and his friends were crouching, and with a hope that was born of despair, he unslung the shotgun he carried, and cried:

"Ida, we must shoot the fuses from the barrels!"

The girl was equal to the occasion, and in less than five seconds later both barrels of each gun were discharged!

And the fuses had disappeared from the three swiftly rolling barrels!

The branded boy had shot two of them off, and Ida had fired twice in order to settle the other one!

If Peter Benham had not thought of taking the two shotguns to Skeleton Bar, what would have been the consequence?

The reader can easily conjecture.

From where they stood Capt. Steel and his band of fiends could not see our three friends, though the smoke from their guns was plainly visible to them.

They thought the shots had been fired as a warning to

the miners, and, after the barrels exploded, they meant to hunt up those who had fired them and make them suffer for attempting to save those below from being blown to atoms.

Down, down went the barrels.

The outlaw captain laughed with devilish glee when he saw the miners scatter to get out of the way, for he saw they had not time enough to do so.

The next minute the barrels were right in their midst!

Then something happened that nearly took the breath away from the members of the masked band.

Their foul plot had failed, for the miners quickly left the spot, and the powder did not explode.

One, two, three minutes passed.

In breathless silence Capt. Steel waited.

But there was no explosion.

Suddenly he caught sight of three forms rapidly making their way to those below.

"Shoot them down!" he hoarsely cried. "They are the ones who spoiled our fun."

A score of rifles were instantly leveled at the branded boy and his companions.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CAPT. STEEL GETS TO BENHAM'S CAVE.

Just as the outlaws were about to press the triggers of their rifles our three friends darted around a bend of rock.

They were saved!

Capt. Steel uttered a howl of rage, and began dancing about like a wild man.

"We are done for now!" he exclaimed, after he had calmed down a little. "See, the miners are getting ready to leave now, and they are certainly bound for our retreat. We must get away at once!"

Under his lead the discomfited villains hurried in the direction of their secret quarters.

The instant they got there the captain commanded every man to get ready to vacate the place at once.

"Suppose they should try the powder game on us," he said. "They might be more successful than we were. That detective knows where this place is, so we must get away before they get here."

"Right you are, cap!" chorused the villains.

"Get all the horses ready, and we will vacate at once, and take all we can carry with us."

Ten minutes later the entire band rode out of the underground retreat and made for the top of the mountain.

In about half an hour they reached a spot that would suit their purpose well, to camp upon for a few days.

It was a wide ledge that was backed by a perpendicular wall of rock and fronted with the brink of a chasm.

There was only one way to reach it, and that by a narrow path which was difficult for a horse to climb.

"If they follow us up here we can shoot them down as fast as they attempt to come up the path," remarked Capt. Steel, with a grim smile.

"But suppose they try to starve us out?" suggested one of the outlaws, shrugging his shoulders.

"I never thought of that"—and the leader of the scoundrels showed a feeling of uneasiness. "But we will stay here and run our chances. If it comes to the worst,

we will show the detective and the miners he has got back of him that we know how to fight.

After giving a faint cheer the men began to put the camp into some sort of shape.

An hour before sunset they were quite comfortably settled, and, as yet they had not seen anything of the miners or anybody else.

Capt. Steel had been studying over the situation all the afternoon, and he had now resolved to make a raid upon Peter Benham's treasure trove, take whatever there was there, and then strike out for some other diggings a couple of hundred miles away.

It was just before sunset that he told his men about Benham's hidden gold, and how the spot was guarded by traps of various kinds.

"If we could once get to the place where the gold is hidden we'd all be worth considerable," said he.

"But it are dangerous ter try an' git there?" spoke up one of the men.

"That is it, exactly. I think, however, if half a dozen of us were to start out, and if we acted in a very cautious manner, we could get hold of the gold."

"Why don't you call for volunteers?"

"That is just what I am going to do. Now, then, who wants to make up a party of six, with myself as leader, to pay Peter Benham's little valley a visit? Remember, each man must be responsible for his own life, and let him also remember that a fortune awaits us if we are successful. If we can get the gold to-night we will start for some other place early to-morrow morning."

The words had scarcely left the captain's lips when nearly the entire band volunteered to go.

Capt. Steel smiled in a satisfied manner.

He was glad to see that the men still stuck to him and believed in him.

He quickly selected six of them, and then said:

"We should reach there before it gets dark; we will stand a better chance."

A minute or two later they set out.

As the outlaw captain knew exactly where the little valley was located, it did not take them long to reach the rough path that led down into it.

Capt. Steel felt elated at having reached Peter Benham's valley without meeting any of the vigilantes, and he resolved to find the old man's treasure and take possession of it at all hazards.

A feeling of extreme confidence came over him, and he began to look about for a means of getting to the other side of the stream without falling in a trap.

The sight of a dead tree gave him an idea.

There was a clear spot on the opposite bank of the stream, and one of the limbs of the tree hung directly over it, though pretty high up.

The villain reckoned that his men might be able to get over in that way, though it would be impossible for him to do it on account of his wounded hand.

"Climb the tree, one of you," said he, "and see if that limb will not bend down far enough to allow you to drop to the ground on the other side of the brook."

"Why can't we ford it?" asked one of the outlaws.

"There might be a bear trap, or something of the sort at the bottom. I know enough of old Benham to be aware of the fact that he has this spot pretty well guarded by dangerous traps. I followed him here once, before our

band was organized, and when I was known solely as Le Grand Meyster; I saw him set his traps, and I can tell you he has plenty of them about."

"If that's ther case we've got ter go slow," replied one of the villains. "I'll go up ther tree an' see how your plan'll work, cap."

He was as good as his word, and two minutes later he was creeping out upon the limb.

As he neared the end it bent down to within ten feet of the ground, and with just the least bit of hesitation, he dropped.

The man landed safely on his feet, and thus encouraged the others went up the tree.

One by one they reached the other side of the stream in the same manner as the first had done.

All but the captain were now over, and he at once told them to push over a log that lay near them so he might come to them.

This they did, and one of them just missed putting his foot in a trap while doing it.

But "a miss is as good as a mile," as the old saying goes, and a few minutes later all of the scoundrels were following Benham's private path to the cave.

It was just dark when the outlaw captain discovered the vine-covered entrance, and he boldly lighted a match and stepped inside.

The outlaws quickly followed him.

Capt. Steel and six of his men had successfully reached Peter Benham's treasure trove, and they were now ready to steal the gold he had been so long in accumulating.

They had got there without falling into a trap; would they be as lucky in getting away?

CHAPTER XIX.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

The instant Dick saw that the four shots had served to destroy the fuses on the rolling barrels, he turned to Peter Benham, and exclaimed:

"Now, then, lead the way below as fast as you can."

"Come," said the old man, and away he darted with a swiftness he hardly seemed capable of.

The branded boy and Ida followed him, and a moment later all three were fairly flying down the crooked path.

Dangerous as the path was, they did not pause until they reached the foot of the mountain, about two hundred yards from the spot where the barrels had landed.

Two minutes later they were met by Balsam Bob and the postmaster.

"What in blazes does all this mean?" asked the big miner, in a puzzled tone.

"It means that the masked band had it all fixed to blow you to kingdom come!" exclaimed Benham. "Had it not been for Dick and Ida, who shot the lighted fuses from the powder barrels as they rolled down, there would have been a big noise around here, and the population would have been somewhat smaller when the smoke cleared away."

"Dick an' Ida, did you say?" and Balsam Bob scrutinized the faces of the disguised young couple. "What in blazes do yer mean, Benham?"

With a smile Dick now stepped forward and made

himself known, greatly to the astonishment of the big miner.

Balsam Bob fairly danced with joy at seeing our hero alive.

"Shoot me for a coyote!" he shouted, "if this ain't what I calls good tidin's! Ther branded boy alive an' well!"

"And this is my daughter Ida, also alive and well," spoke up Benham. "She's wearing this rig so as to fool the outlaws and make them believe she is dead."

Rand now appeared on the scene, followed by a crowd of the miners, and they listened while Dick explained just what had happened.

"Hurrah for the branded boy an' his pretty sweet-heart in men's togs!" yelled Balsam Bob; and the cheers were given with a will.

They soon reached the shanty Benham had purchased that morning of a disgusted miner, and when Jane found her sister alive and well she nearly hugged her to death, in spite of the fact that she was attired in boy's clothing.

Acting on the advice of Benham, Dick concluded not to go with the vigilantes on their hunt for the outlaws.

Somehow he felt that the expedition would prove a failure, and he told Ida so.

"There is one thing certain," said the girl, "I shall never feel safe as long as that wretch of a Le Grand Meyster, or Capt. Steel, as he calls himself, is alive. He probably believes both you and I to be dead, and if he should find that we are not he would never rest until he had murdered you and got me in his power again."

"Rank told me they were going to blow up the underground den with dynamite," spoke up the girl's father. "If they do that it will only be a question of a day or two before the whole business is cleaned out. You both promise me that you will stay here, and I will follow Balsam Bob and the men to see how they make out."

Dick and Ida gave the promise, and the old man set out, following the vigilance committee on foot.

Dick was pretty sleepy, so he retired to his quarters and was soon in a sound slumber.

When he awoke it was past sunset.

He quickly arose, and, on going downstairs, was informed by Ida and Jane that their father had not returned yet, though the vigilantes had been back some hours.

"I'll go out and see if I can learn anything," said the branded boy.

He hurried to the post office and met Rank and Balsam Bob.

"How did you make out?" he asked.

"We blowed ther den all ter flinders!" exclaimed the big miner; "but ther masked band had flew ther coop afore we got there."

"What! Gone?"

"That is just the size of it," spoke up the detective. "They stole a march on us in a very neat manner."

"Was old man Benham with you on the mountain?"

"No; we never saw a sign of him."

"That's funny," mused Dick. "I would not be surprised if something has happened to him."

"The outlaws may have captured him," said Rank; "and if they have, it will be a difficult job to get him away from them alive. I know exactly where the band have camped, and it will be next to an impossibility to dislodge them under a few days."

"How do you propose to do it, then?" asked the boy.

"Starve them out."

"Don't you think it could be done in a quicker and better way?"

"See here!" exclaimed Rank, "you have a pretty good head; Balsam Bob and I are just going up the mountain to scout around a little—suppose you go along?"

"I am glad of the opportunity," returned Dick. "Wait until I go back to the shanty, and I'll be with you."

In five minutes he returned, ready and equipped for the journey.

It had been dark just about an hour when the three started out, and exercising the utmost caution, they proceeded for the spot the outlaws had camped upon.

It took them some time to get there, and then they made a careful survey of the place.

"They certainly have a good stronghold," said Dick, in a whisper. "They could shoot our men down as fast as they attempted to get up that narrow path. But don't you think their camp could be reached by some other way?"

"I fail to see how it could," replied the detective, while Balsam Bob scratched his head in a puzzled way.

"Didn't you say you blew up the underground den with dynamite?"

"Yes."

"Well, why couldn't the same thing be used to make a way to get to the camp of the villains?"

"By Jove!" cried Rank. "Dick, you have hit it exactly. Why couldn't I think of that?"

"The branded boy has got a good thinker in his head," observed Balsam Bob. "He's smarter nor a steel trap, he is."

"The thing can certainly be done," went on the detective. "We will go down and notify the men, and come back and finish up the business before morning."

"Wait!" interrupted Dick, as his companions turned toward Skeleton Bar. "I am anxious to learn something of Peter Benham. It may be that we will find him at a place I know of not far away from here. Come with me; it will not take long."

Much puzzled as to where Dick was bound for, the two men followed him.

In a few minutes they turned down the path leading to the little valley.

"Be careful and walk right in my tracks," said he; and, more puzzled than ever, his companions obeyed him.

As he had been over Benham's secret path, Dick had no difficulty in keeping out of the way of the traps, and, after crossing the brook at the proper place, he soon stood in front of the cave.

He whistled softly, hoping that the object of his search might be inside, but receiving no response, he boldly pulled the vines aside, and, lighting a match, peered inside.

There was no one there, but by the looks of things some one had been there, and recently at that.

As he got accustomed to the faint light made by the burning match, Dick's eyes became riveted upon the back of the cave.

He turned as pale as a sheet and started forward.

Then he uttered a cry of dismay and allowed the match to fall from his hand.

No wonder the branded boy was surprised. The hole in the back of the cave was open, and Benham's golden treasure was gone!

CHAPTER XX.

THE BRANDING IRON AGAIN.

Peter Benham became very much troubled in regard to his hidden gold when the outlaws were at large on the mountain.

Suppose they should choose his little valley for a temporary stronghold—what then?

True, some of them would fall victims to his traps, but those who did would but warn the others, and the majority of them would surely find his cave.

And once inside the cave they would surely unearth his treasure!

"I'm going back there," muttered the old man, shortly before sunset. "Dick Mount and the girls need not know where I am going, and then they won't think I am running into danger. That gold must be saved for my daughters!"

It was sunset when Benham arrived at the point where the stony path led into the snug little valley, and as he looked at the sinking orb of day it struck him that he had never witnessed such a beautiful sunset before.

And, though he did not know it, this was the last sunset Peter Benham would ever look upon!

For fully five minutes the old man lingered, taking in the beauty of the scene in solemn admiration.

Then he slowly wended his way below, where it was already growing dark.

From light into darkness, Peter Benham!

The moment he reached the cave he lighted a lantern and went directly to his hidden gold.

"Something tells me I ought to change this treasure to some other place," he muttered. "But where will I put it?"

A moment later he thought of a place.

He would hide it in the natural chimney of the cave.

As soon as he conceived the idea he went right to work, and in twenty minutes the change was effected.

He left a single nugget in the square hole where the gold had been stowed, though he did not know it.

"I guess it is safe enough, even if the masked band should come here," he muttered; and then he blew out the lantern and prepared to go home.

Just as he was about to step through the vines that hung over the entrance he heard low voices close at hand.

Much surprised, he drew back into the cave.

A strange feeling of fear came over him, and he listened intently.

He could hear softly approaching footsteps now, and half a minute later his heart almost ceased to beat.

Whoever it was outside, they were about to enter the cave.

And to the best of his knowledge and belief, nobody but his daughter Ida and the branded boy knew how to get there without falling into his traps.

But he was well satisfied that it was neither of those two who were approaching. The voices were strange, and that was enough.

The next instant the light of a match flared up, and Benham beheld a masked man peering into the cave.

Back into the shadow he crouched, hardly daring to breathe for fear his presence would be discovered.

Capt. Steel promptly walked in, and his men followed him.

They were going to rob Benham's treasure trove, as the reader knows.

About the cave they walked, with lighted matches in their hands, and at length paused before the opening the gold had been removed from, without seeing the crouching man.

"Ha!" exclaimed the outlaw captain. "What is this?"

He thrust a lighted match into the hole as he spoke.

The next instant a frightful oath left his lips.

Turning quickly to his companions, he held a small nugget of gold before their eyes.

"We are too late!" he hissed; "the treasure has been removed!"

All of them became satisfied that this was true when they had examined the hole and the neat-fitting slab of stone that had covered it.

"Benham has taken his gold to Skeleton Bar," observed Capt. Steel. "If we could only lay hands on him now, I would torture him until he caused it to be turned over to us."

"Hadn't we better look around here a bit, cap?" asked one of the outlaws. "It are jist possible that there might be another place in here with some gold in it."

Peter Benham gave himself up for lost as he heard these words. He knew it was only a question of a few seconds before he would be discovered.

"What is over there in the corner?" cried one of the villains. "I—— Great snakes! There is somebody here!"

Peter Benham was discovered!

The next instant a couple of revolvers covered him, and he was ordered to get up.

He obeyed quickly enough, and, seizing his arms, the outlaws conducted him out of the cave.

"Ha! Benham," observed Capt. Steel, with mock politeness, "I am pleased to meet you. Why didn't you make known your presence before?"

"Le Grand Meyster, or Capt. Steel, as you call yourself, I want to inform you that you have been neatly foiled. How you knew where my gold was hidden, I don't know; but one thing I do know is that you will never lay hands on it."

"Go easy, old man," retorted the outlaw leader, with a scowl. "I intend to have your treasure in my possession before I am twelve hours older."

"You will have to go down to Skeleton Bar to get it, then."

"We will see about that part of it. Fetch him along to our camp, men."

With a pistol thrust against each of his throbbing temples, Benham was forced to lead the villains safely along his private path.

When they started up the ascent the outlaws breathed easier, and, once above, they started for their camp as fast as they could go.

Benham had no idea of what the villains intended to do with him, but he felt that they would resort to something desperate, in order to get possession of his gold.

But he resolved to die before he would tell where it was.

And if he did die, how would his daughters know where their golden legacy was?

He was not kept long waiting to learn what was to be done with him, for the minute the outlaws' camp was reached, Capt. Steel ordered the branding iron, with which he had stamped the letters "U. S." on the back of Dick Mount, to be brought to him.

"Put it in the fire and let it get red-hot!" he exclaimed, with a cruel smile.

His command was obeyed, and then he ordered Benham to be bound securely to a pine tree that stood close at hand.

"Now, Benham," said he, in an icy tone, "tell me where your gold is."

"I will not tell."

"Yes, you will. You already said it was in Skeleton Bar; now, tell me exactly where it is located, so I can get it without running the risk of being captured by the vigilance committee."

"I will not tell."

"Will not? Men, bring me the branding iron!"

A moment later he stood before the helpless man, with the red-hot instrument in his hand.

"Tell me or I will burn your eyes out of your head!"

"Never!" almost screamed Benham.

The words had scarcely left his lips when the cruel brand was thrust against his eyes!

No one but a fiend incarnate could have held it there; but Capt. Steel shoved hard upon it, until Benham's eyesight was gone forever!

There was a horrible stench of burning flesh, and even the members of the lawless band turned their eyes from the cruel and sickening scene.

CHAPTER XXI.

DYNAMITE.

"Gone!" gasped Dick; "the gold is gone!"

"What gold?" asked Rank. "Did Peter Benham keep his gold in this place?"

"He did," replied the boy. "He showed it to me only to-day, and a neat pile of it there was, too."

"Perhaps he has removed it, since."

"I don't think he has been here, but possibly he has."

"If it was not he who removed it, Capt. Steel is the one who did it. He was aware that Benham had a treasure here, and he led me here to assist him to get it on the same day I lowered you into the chasm. When we got to the edge of the cliff up there we saw you about to take a bath in the stream. The outlaw captain thought you were a ghost."

"Then you knew that Benham had a supply of gold hidden somewhere in this little valley?"

"Only from what Capt. Steel said."

"I wonder how he knew about it?"

"He said he learned it when he used to try to court Ida a few months ago, when he was known as Le Grand Meyster."

"I am satisfied that he has been here and robbed the old man."

As Dick spoke the words he led the way outside.

"There is a possibility that the old man removed it himself, but I must confess it looks as you say."

"What do you advise now?"

"Let us go down to the Bar and hunt for Benham. If we can't find him you may depend that it was he who made the change here, and that he has not returned yet."

"And if he is there, and has not been here since he came away with Ida and myself to-day?"

"Well, in either case we will lead the vigilantes to the outlaws' camp and make the attack upon them."

"Very well; let us be off at once."

Without further delay the men started for the Bar.

As all the outlaws were gathered at their camp farther up on the mountain, they were not molested or interfered with by anyone, and in due time they arrived at their destination.

The detective at once set out to get the vigilance committee together, while Dick went direct to the shanty of the Benhams.

Upon inquiry the boy learned from the girls that their father had not been home since he had left earlier in the afternoon.

"I hope it was he who took the gold out of the hole in the back of the cave," he thought. "I begin to think the same as Rank now."

When he got to the post office he found the vigilance committee making active preparations for the proposed attack upon the outlaws.

Rank and Balsam Bob took charge of the dynamite cartridges, and when every man in the party had mounted his horse, the big miner gave the command to move.

Dick rode a borrowed horse, and he kept at the side of the detective as much as possible.

He informed Rank that Benham had left his shanty to follow the party who attacked the outlaws' stronghold, and had not been seen since.

"It is quite probable that he has taken the gold away, then," said the detective. "But even if the outlaws have it in their possession they will not keep it long, for I feel that this will wind up the existence of the masked band of Skeleton Bar. I want to take Capt. Steel alive, if there is a possibility of doing it."

"There is no doubt that he will make a strong fight,"

observed the branded boy. "If it comes to the worst, I shall feel justified in shooting the villain down. In such an event I would feel that I had partially avenged the murder of my father and brother, and reward him for the brand he put on my back, which I will carry to my grave."

"If you can aid me in taking him alive don't shoot him, Dick. It is worth more to me if I can turn him alive over to the government authorities than if he were dead. Besides, I will have accomplished just what I came to Skeleton Bar to do."

"All right, Mr. Rank, I will do as you say, unless circumstances force me to do otherwise," returned Dick.

With as much silence as possible, the party of mounted men rode along the mountain trail.

The deserted ruins of the late stronghold of the masked band were passed, and then, under the guidance of Dick and the detective, they proceeded direct for the camp high up on the mountain.

As they neared the place they brought their horses down to a slow walk.

Dick, who had his eyes strained to their utmost, suddenly beheld a man staggering toward them.

He ran toward them a few paces, and then, stumbling over a piece of rock, fell headlong to the ground.

"Look out, Dick," cautioned Rank, "that may be a ruse to lead us in a trap."

The man did not attempt to get upon his feet, and a moment later the entire band of vigilantes came to a halt near the spot.

Dick dismounted, and, lighting a match, held it near the face of the man who had stumbled to the ground.

The next instant a startled cry left his lips, and he staggered back against his horse.

"My God!" he gasped; "it is Peter Benham, and he is blind!"

"What!" cried Rank, hurriedly, sliding from the saddle.

Half a dozen of the miners followed his example, and a moment later one of them produced a bull's-eye lantern.

It was Benham, sure enough. Whether he had made his escape from the outlaws and staggered to the spot where he fell, or whether they sent him away, it is hard to say.

Anyhow, the suffering man was now unconscious, if not dead.

The detective examined him, and found that he was still alive, and a few drops of whisky poured down his throat caused him to partially regain his senses.

He must have suffered terribly from the fiendish treatment he had received at the hands of Capt. Steel, for his ravings and mutterings were something awful.

Dick knelt at his side, and with tears in his eyes implored him to speak.

In a minute or two Benham quieted down, and then, after a short silence, asked:

"Dick Mount, is that you?"

"It is, Mr. Benham," replied the boy.

"Tell the girls to—to—read the paper in the little tin box, and—and do as it says; the gold is—is—is in the chim——"

That was all the poor man said, and with a gasp he fell back.

"He is dead!" solemnly exclaimed Balsam Bob.

Such was indeed the fact. Peter Benham, who had been so cruelly blinded by the captain of the masked band, had gone to that bourne whence no traveler ever returns, and his sufferings were over.

For the space of five minutes a deep hush hung over the miners.

Then a low, sullen roar came from them, which sounded like the noise made by a lot of maddened beasts.

They were thirsting to avenge Benham.

"Forward, march!" cried Balsam Bob. "Boys, when the time comes we must show no quarter!"

"Remember, the dynamite first," exclaimed the detective. "Don't be hasty."

"All right," replied the big miner; "give me all ther cartridges. I'll 'tend ter ther dynamite."

Rank passed them over, and, urging his horse forward at a faster gait, he pressed up the dangerous path.

The rest followed until they came to the spot where they would be forced to proceed in single file if they desired to go any farther, and the outlaws, who had been aroused, were waiting to shoot them down as fast as they strove to reach their camp, which was but fifty yards distant.

"Wait until the dynamite explodes, and then half of you go to the left, where Balsam Bob went, and the rest stay here to prevent the band from escaping this way," said Rank.

A minute later three explosions rang out in rapid succession.

Balsam Bob had discharged the cartridges, but instead of trying to blow the wall down, he had hurled them over it into the very center of the outlaws' camp!

Over half of the villainous band were blown into atoms, and the rest, in their frightened efforts to escape, ran plump into the arms of the waiting vigilantes.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

Dick and the detective kept their eyes open for the appearance of Capt. Steel.

Presently they caught sight of him reeling about like a drunken man.

A piece of rock had struck him in the face and torn his eyes from the sockets, yet he still lived, and he was suffering as his victim of a short time before had suffered.

Peter Benham was avenged!

As Rank seized hold of the outlaw captain he saw that he was fast bleeding to death.

"It will be all over with him in a few minutes," said he. "Dick, ask him if he has anything to say; he seems to be conscious of what is going on."

"Capt. Steel," said Dick, bending over the dying villain, "you are done for at last. Have you anything to say to the boy you branded with the letters U. S., after murdering his father and brother?"

The villain gave a start that seemed to be one of pleasure, and though he could scarcely articulate, in a gloating manner he gasped:

"Dick Mount, I am your cousin, Austin Peter, who disappeared from Topeka, Kansas, a few years ago. That is why I branded you instead of killing you and sending you after your father and brother! I have been a villain, and I am proud of it. It may be consoling to you to know that you have such a worthy relative."

Astonished beyond measure at this startling news, the branded boy said not a word.

"Answer me one question," said the bleeding outlaw, after a pause; "how is it that you are alive, after being thrown into the chasm?"

"It will do you no good to know," spoke up the detective.

Capt. Steel made no reply to this, but sank back in an exhausted condition.

A minute later and he again spoke.

"I am going to die game," said he. "As long as I have my senses you will not hear me complain."

He did not speak again, and half an hour later he was dead.

A short time after, the vigilance committee started back for Skeleton Bar.

They took the bodies of Peter Benham and Capt. Steel with them, but not a single prisoner!

The latter fact was because there was not an outlaw alive!

Enraged at what had occurred at the hands of the ruthless villains, the miners had shown no quarter, and the masked band of Skeleton Bar had been completely wiped out of existence.

The next day the remains of Benham were interred in the little cemetery, and then Dick informed his sorrowing daughters of his last words.

"He must have referred to the natural chimney in the cave," he added. "Will you trust Rank and I to look for the gold?"

Of course the girls gave their consent, so the two promptly repaired to the little valley.

The golden treasure was found in the chimney just as the man who had worked so long to save it up had placed it, and before nightfall it was transferred to Skeleton Bar.

Meanwhile, Ida and Jane had found the paper and read its contents.

The paper revealed an unpleasant fact to the girls.

Their father had been a defaulter to the extent of a few thousand dollars in the town he had left some years before, and he desired the amount to be paid back, with interest.

The rest of his fortune, which was ample enough, belonged to them.

That was all there was of it.

But little more remains to be told.

Of course Ida and Jane Benham left Skeleton Bar, and carried out the wishes of their father to the very letter.

Dick Mount liked the society of Ida so well that he went with them, and when Rank had settled up his business with the government he, too, came to locate in that town.

A few months later the detective married Jane, and Dick and Ida became inmates of his household.

Meanwhile, Skeleton Bar grew rapidly, and in four years' time it had assumed the proportions of a thriving little city.

Then Dick married Ida, and formed a partnership with Rank in a large wholesale merchandise store.

They are still living there, and so is Balsam Bob and Will Duvall, who, by the way, is mayor of the city.

Of course the "U. S." is still upon Dick's back, and there it will remain until he dies.

There is only one thing that causes him to grow sad when he thinks of the brand upon him, and that is when it reminds him of the death of his father and invalid brother.

If it were not for this he would, with a feeling of pride, exhibit the brand to his friends and recount the story belonging to it.

Anyhow, it is no disgrace to carry the letters "U. S." upon a person's body, for they stand for the best country under the sun!

THE END.

The next issue, No. 74, will contain a splendid story, entitled "The Deuce and The King of Diamonds; or, Two Southern Boys in South Africa." By the author of "Among the Malays." It is a true account of how two Southern boys made a great fortune in the diamond fields of South Africa. The friendship of Barney Barnato, a South African millionaire, and the chance meeting with an old Jew in New York, were the factors that made their success possible. This story goes to show what an important element chance is in the affairs of young men.

Don't miss reading it, for it is as bright and as entertaining as any story that has ever been written about the great diamond mines of the Rand.

DIAMOND DICK, JR., WEEKLY

Tales of Western Adventure

32 Large - Sized Pages

5c.

Handsome Colored

Covers

The Diamond Dick Weekly contains the best tales of Western life ever written. They detail the adventures of Diamond Dick and his clever son Bertie, who protect the weak and maintain law and order on our western plains. Do not fail to read them.

LATEST NUMBERS

- 382—Diamond Dick, Jr.'s Prize Package;
or, Saved From the Blizzard.
- 383—Diamond Dick, Jr., Snowed in;
or, Brick-Top Ben's Quick Work.
- 384—Diamond Dick, Jr.'s Manhood;
or, A Hot Time at Racerville.
- 385—Diamond Dick, Jr.'s Ice Boat Special;
or, The Perilous Cruise of the Dashaway.
- 386—Diamond Dick, Jr., to the Front;
or, The Queerest Diamond Mine in the World.
- 387—Diamond Dick's Red Trailer;
or, Running Down the Train Robbers.
- 388—Diamond Dick and the Bullfighters;
or, The Perils of San Pueblo.
- 389—Diamond Dick In Old Santa Fe;
or, The League of the Montezumas.
- 390—Diamond Dick In the Desert of Death;
or, The Cryptogram of The Cliff Dwellers.
- 391—Diamond Dick and the Ranch Rustlers;
or, The Satanic Doctor From Santa Fe.

**To be had from all newsdealers, or sent by the publishers
upon receipt of price**

STREET & SMITH, 238 William Street, New York